

*“Let us realize that we are sinners  
and have much to expiate, while  
others less culpable than we are  
suffer more than we do.”*

—Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne



*Bicentennial sculpture of Saint Rose  
Philippine Duchesne 2018, by Gianfranco Tassara  
in the garden of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis*

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## Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne

Religious of the Sacred Heart  
1769-1852



### Beginnings

Rose Philippine Duchesne was born August 29, 1769, in Grenoble, an ancient city, France’s beautiful gateway to the Alps. One of eight children in a family of privilege, she was strong-willed, impetuous and generous. Educated by the Visitation nuns at Sainte-Marie d’En-Haut monastery, she was drawn to their life of contemplation. She entered the order when she was nineteen against the wishes of her family.

The French Revolution soon forced the nuns to leave the monastery, and Philippine returned to her family. For eleven years, she risked her freedom and life by nursing prisoners, bringing priests to the faithful and teaching and feeding poor children. At the close of the war, she gained title to Sainte-Marie d’En Haut and opened a boarding school. Only a few other nuns returned, but they did not stay long. In December 1804, she met Madeleine Sophie Barat, leader of a new religious congregation, the Society of the Sacred Heart. Philippine immediately turned over Sainte-Marie d’En Haut and entered the Society.

A deep friendship formed between these two remarkable women of such different temperaments. For twelve years, the patient wisdom of Sophie molded the ardent, steadfast Philippine into a religious called to glorify the Heart of Jesus. Philippine, whose greatest joy was to spend whole nights in prayer, soon felt a call to serve as a missionary. Many times, Philippine shared with Sophie her dream of bringing the Gospel to the native peoples in America, but her skills were needed at home, first in the school at Sainte-Marie, and from 1815 as the Society’s secretary general.



*Saint Madeleine Sophie sends Saint Philippine  
to America. Icon by Patricia Reid, RSCJ*

### Sowing the Seeds

Philippine saw a chance to turn her missionary dreams to reality when Bishop William Dubourg visited the Society’s motherhouse in Paris. He had come from the United States to recruit nuns to establish schools for the Native Americans and French children in his diocese of Louisiana. On May 16, 1817, Philippine begged Sophie Barat on her knees for permission to travel to the mission; at last Sophie gave her consent.

Philippine sailed from Bordeaux with four other religious in March of the following year, providentially arriving in New Orleans on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, May 29, 1818. They later sailed up the Mississippi River to



*First house in St. Charles, Missouri, 1818*

St. Louis, Missouri, a trip of forty days, arriving on August 22, 1818.

On September 14, 1818, Philippine opened a school in a log cabin, not in St. Louis, as expected, but across the Missouri River in St. Charles, Missouri, the first free school west of the Mississippi. A few weeks later, the Academy of the Sacred Heart was opened with three students. The frontier conditions were a challenge. After one year the school was closed and they opened a new school in the nearby town of Florissant, Missouri.

Despite never mastering the English language, Philippine served as both superior of her religious community and head of the school. Nevertheless, she reserved for herself the most menial of chores: tending livestock, chopping wood, gardening, mending shoes and clothing, nursing the sick and making soap and candles. In Florissant, she often slept in a small closet under the stairs so she could slip in without disturbing others after her all-night prayers in the chapel nearby. (This room can still be seen

at the Old Saint Ferdinand Shrine in Florissant, Missouri.) She survived pioneer conditions, a bout with yellow fever and persistent feelings of failure.

### Taking Root

The Society soon attracted new vocations and opened a novitiate. Before long, Philippine was responsible for six convents: St. Charles (which reopened in 1828), St. Louis and Florissant in Missouri, and Grand Coteau, St. Michael, and LaFourche in Louisiana. At this time, unfortunately, the Society also was complicit and participated in the enslavement of human beings. While difficult for us to imagine today, this practice was entrenched in the economy and civil society of Missouri and Louisiana.

Wishing to ensure continuity in mission, Philippine ensured that the Plan of Studies was in place. The Religious of the Sacred Heart (RSCJ) offered their students a well-rounded curriculum, combining spiritual and intellectual training. Besides schools, Philippine opened the first orphanage in St. Louis.

Finally, in 1841, Philippine's desire to serve among the native people came to fruition. At the specific request of Fr. Peter Verhaegen, the Jesuit in charge of the mission, she went with three other RSCJ to Sugar Creek, Kansas, to establish a school for Potawatomi girls. At 72, she was too frail to be of much help with the physical work, and she could not learn the Potawatomi language. She spent much of her time in prayer, gaining the name "Woman Who Prays Always." After just one year, she



*Philippine's mission. Icon by Milton Frenzel*

was called back to St. Charles because of her health. Although she was in Sugar Creek just a short time, she made a deep impression on the Potawatomi.

### Philippine's Legacy

Philippine once wrote: "We cultivate a very small field for Christ. But we love it, knowing that God does not require great achievements, but a heart that holds back nothing for self."

In spite of her experience of many failures, her missionary spirit was the beginning of the Society of the Sacred Heart's spreading around the world. Because of her fidelity to the mission of the Society of the Sacred Heart

and her confidence in Madeleine Sophie Barat, the Society remained one congregation, its internationality one of its strongest characteristics.

Today, RSCJ serve in 41 countries. In the spirit of Philippine, these educators prepare the young for today and tomorrow; they seek out the poor and those who have no voice in today's society. Every frontier we face cries out for pioneers who have the courage to follow God's call and the wisdom to pray always.

In recent years, the Society has also engaged in efforts of researching our history with enslavement and fostering reconciliation with descendants of those enslaved by the Society in these early years.



Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne died on November 18, 1852, at the age of 83. She is interred in a shrine built in her honor at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in St. Charles, Missouri. She was beatified in 1940 and canonized July 3, 1988.

*November 18 is the Feast of Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne.*