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FONTBONNE, MARIE-ANTOINETTE (sometimes incorrectly Jeanne-Marie), named **Sister Delphine**, first superior and founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph in the United States and Canada; b. 24 Dec. 1813 at Bas-en-Basset, France, eleventh child of Claude Fontbonne, vine-dresser, and Marie-Françoise Pleynet; d. 7 Feb. 1856 in Toronto, and is buried in St Michael's Cemetery.

Trained from youth in a pious manner and educated by the Sisters of St Joseph, Marie-Antoinette Fontbonne entered that community in Lyons in June 1832, taking the name Sister Delphine. A few years later, in response to a plea from the bishop of St Louis, Mo., for help in spreading the faith, she and her elder sister Antoinette, another member of the congregation and known as Sister Fébronie, offered their services as missionaries. Their superior, Mother Saint-Jean, who was also their aunt, gave her approval and in 1836 the two sisters, joined en route by their brother, Father Jacques, and four other members of the community went to the United States. After studying English for a short time, Sister Delphine was appointed superior that year of a log cabin convent in Carondelet (St Louis), the congregation's first motherhouse in the United States. Several years of service in that area followed. In 1850 she was appointed superior of a noviciate and orphanage in Philadelphia.

Mother Delphine might have spent her entire career in the United States had it not been for the visit to Philadelphia in 1851 of Toronto's Bishop Armand-François-Marie de [Charbonnel*](#), whose father had helped Mother Saint-Jean re-establish the order following the upheavals of the French revolution. When Bishop Charbonnel, persistent in his efforts to bring religious to Toronto, learned of the presence in Philadelphia of a member of the Fontbonne family trained in France in the original spirit of the order, he immediately asked her bishop that she be released to look after an orphanage in his diocese. In accordance with his wish, Mother Delphine, Sister Mary Martha [[Maria Bunning*](#)], and two other sisters arrived in Toronto on 7 Oct. 1851 to take their place alongside the Loretto sisters [*see* [Ellen Dease*](#)] who had arrived in 1847. The Sisters of St Joseph immediately took charge of the institution established by [John Elmsley*](#) to care for orphaned children, many of whom had lost their parents in the epidemics that had visited Upper Canada. One contemporary account records: "Hardly had they placed their bonnets and shawls in the front room, when the Superior was inspecting, arranging, ordering, from dormitory to cellar. It was not long before a complete transformation was effected, and one of the front rooms on the ground floor turned into a most inviting chapel."

But the sisters did not restrict their apostolic activities to the care of orphans and the needy in Toronto. As early as 1852 Mother Delphine, at the request of Vicar General Edward John

Gordon*, sent her friend and former teaching companion Sister Mary Martha to found another orphanage in Hamilton, and two sisters began teaching at St Patrick's School in Toronto. Within a year of its establishment in Toronto the community had welcomed its first Canadian-born member, Margaret Brennan*, named Sister Teresa. The sisters assumed responsibility for two more separate schools in 1853 and established a mission in Amherstburg. In 1854 they responded to a request to care for men injured in a train wreck in Chatham, and built a new motherhouse near St Paul's Church in Toronto. Next year, at the request of Bishop Charbonnel, Mother Delphine undertook her most significant accomplishment, the planning of the House of Providence, in which anyone in need was to be received. But she was not to see the building completed.

At the close of 1855 Toronto was struck by another typhus epidemic and, as always, the clergy responded selflessly to the needs of the victims. Untiring in her efforts to care for the orphans, for her sisters, and for a woman distraught at the death of her husband, Mother Delphine witnessed the death of two of her nuns before herself contracting the disease. After an illness of only two weeks she died on 7 Feb. 1856, leaving a community of 38 members to mourn her. At the early age of 42, Mother Delphine, by her desire to help the poor and develop the minds and hearts of the neglected, had left a splendid example of love of God and love of neighbour.

Bishop Charbonnel dispatched a letter to France to inform her brother and to express his appreciation of Mother Delphine's worth: "This excellent and worthy niece of his saintly aunt, Mother Saint-Jean, in five years had established in Toronto a noviciate, an orphanage, and a house of temporal and spiritual succour, and several other [establishments] in the diocese. . . . Very sensible and wise, she . . . possessed sound judgement, perceptiveness, and foresight. She was industrious, active, and provident."

MARY BERNITA YOUNG

Arch. de la Congrégation des Sœurs de Saint-Joseph de Lyon (Lyon, France), Reg. Arch. municipales, Bas-en-Basset, France, Descendance des époux Fontbonne-Pleyne (photocopy). Sisters of St Joseph of Toronto, *Community annals*, [1851–1956] (3v. to date, [Toronto, 1968–]), 1: 6–7. D. M. Dougherty et al., *Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet* (St Louis, Mo., 1966), 55, 62, 70. *Jubilee volume, 1842–1892: the archdiocese of Toronto and Archbishop Walsh*, [ed. J. R. Teefy] (Toronto, 1892), 221–23, 230–31. [Agnes Murphy], named Sister Mary Agnes, *The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph: Le Puy, Lyons, St. Louis, Toronto* (Toronto, 1951). J. Rivaux, *Vie de la révérende Mère Saint-Jean . . .* (Grenoble, France, 1885), 394–95. M. B. Young, *The dawn of a new day: a sketch of the life and times of Sister Delphine Fontbonne, 1813–1856* (Toronto, 1983).

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