

BUNNING, MARIA (the name is sometimes written **Von Bunning**), named **Sister Mary Martha**; sister in the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph, foundress and first superior of the Sisters of St Joseph of the diocese of Hamilton; b. 1824 in the parish of Husen or Husum, Kingdom of Hanover (West Germany), daughter of Wileum and Ellen Bunning; d. 13 June 1868 at Toronto, Ont.

When Maria Bunning came to America she lived in the St Louis area on the Mississippi River. At age 21 she entered the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph of Carondelet at St Louis and received the religious habit. In August 1848 she professed the vows of perpetual poverty, chastity, and obedience, taking the name Sister Mary Martha. She began work in the order's convent, boarding school, and orphanage, and with Mother Delphine **Fontbonne***, a pioneer of the American community, taught in St Vincent's School, the first parochial school in St Louis.

The 45-member St Louis community lost three sisters during the cholera epidemic of 1849–51, when requests for their help, especially in caring for homeless children, increased. In 1850 Sister Martha was sent with Mother Delphine to Philadelphia to operate an orphanage, a school, and a hospital, and while there she became the superior of St Ann's Widows' Asylum.

Despite limited personnel and heavy commitments the Sisters of St Joseph answered an urgent appeal of Bishop Armand de **Charbonnel*** of Toronto to extend their charitable work to Canada. After a week's journey by boat and stage coach from Philadelphia, Mother Delphine, Sister Mary Martha, and two other sisters arrived on 7 Oct. 1851 in Toronto, where they were met by John **ELMSLEY** and other representatives of the Catholic community.

On 19 April 1852, at the request of Vicar General Edward John **GORDON** of Toronto, Sister Mary Martha and two novices moved to Hamilton. Sister Martha was appointed superior, and Gordon provided a house for a convent and orphanage. In 1853 the separate schools of the city were placed under the direction of the sisters, who also opened a private school at their convent. Seven sisters from Toronto helped in the work, and novices from Hamilton were sent to Toronto to be trained. In response to Mother Martha's appeal for contributions to support the orphanage, the citizens of Hamilton donated the proceeds of a public concert in 1853; this became an annual event, known as the Orphans' Festival, and it provided a major portion of the orphanage's financial assistance for over 100 years. In the early years the festival engaged professional talent and was responsible for bringing noted singers and entertainers to Hamilton. Gradually, the children began performing shows written by the sisters, for which they also composed music and designed costumes. Ever mindful of the orphans, Mother Martha and her sisters collected money, food, clothing, and wood in the city of Hamilton, throughout the diocese, and in outlying areas as far as Goderich. Farmers offered horses and wagons to transport the sisters and the supplies they collected. Despite the physical hardships of the expeditions, made even in winter, and the ridicule of some who criticized the sisters' collections

as begging, they remained a means of support for the orphans for many years. A government grant of \$600 was procured in 1856 through Sir Allan Napier MACNAB, a benefactor of the sisters. The grant was given annually and was increased in later years. During the cholera epidemic of 1854, and in the typhus epidemic that followed, Mother Martha witnessed the self-sacrifice of her sisters who cared for the afflicted immigrants throughout the city. On some occasions their ministrations included the burial of the dead.

John Farrell*, who became bishop of Hamilton in 1856 when the diocese of Toronto was divided, encouraged the Sisters of St Joseph to expand their charitable and educational activities. At this time the Hamilton convent became the motherhouse and noviciate for the Hamilton diocese, and a new convent was opened in 1857. Between 1852 and 1862, 23 novices were received into the Hamilton congregation and by 1862 the community numbered approximately 28. Under Mother Martha's capable management branch houses were opened in quick succession in Paris, Brantford, and Oakville, and a hospital and a home for the poor and destitute were established in Guelph in 1861.

The arduous responsibilities of her office weakened the health of Mother Martha, who, saddened by misunderstandings involving her authority, resigned in August 1862. She returned to St Louis and resumed teaching; in 1865 she was appointed superior of a hospital and home in Erie, Pa. Realizing that her health was declining, Mother Martha obtained permission to visit Toronto, where she died a few days after her arrival.

In the short period of 10 years in Canada, Mother Martha Bunning had laid a solid and lasting foundation for the Sisters of St Joseph of Hamilton. She responded to the needs of her time by establishing orphanages, schools, hospitals, and homes for the aged which continued to flourish under the guidance of her community.

SISTER MARY ROSE PAUTLER

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