

MARY JOSEPH ROGERS

Mother Mary Joseph Rogers founded the Maryknoll Sisters, the first American-based Catholic foreign missions society for women. Mary Josephine Rogers, called “Mollie” by her family, was born Oct. 27, 1882, in Roxbury, Massachusetts. After graduating from Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, she earned her teaching certificate. Mary taught for several years at Smith College, followed by teaching assignments in several public elementary and high schools in the Boston area.

Interest in Foreign Missions

Mary was deeply impacted by the flourishing Protestant Student Volunteer Movement that was sending missionaries around the world. In 1908, due to her growing interest in missionary work, she began volunteering her time to assist Father James Walsh in writing and editing the Catholic Foreign Missionary Society of America’s magazine *Field Afar*, now known as *Maryknoll*.

In September 1910 at the International Eucharistic Congress in Montreal, Canada, Mary realized she shared a passion to develop a foreign missions society based in the United States with Father Walsh and Father Thomas Frederick Price. As a result of this common vision, they founded the Maryknoll Mission Movement.

Mary provided assistance to the group from Boston where she had family responsibilities before finally joining them in September 1912. She was given the formal name, “Mary Joseph.” She founded a lay group of women interested in missions known as the Teresians, named after the 16th Century Spanish Catholic nun St. Teresa of Avila.

In 1913, both the male and female societies moved to Ossining, New York to a farm renamed “Maryknoll.”

The pope recognized the work of the Teresians in 1920, allowing the growing society to be designated as a diocesan religious congregation, officially the Foreign Mission Sisters of St. Dominic – but known as the Maryknoll Sisters. On February 15, 1921, Mary Joseph was appointed first prioress and then elected in 1925 as Mother General, taking the title Mother Mary Joseph, a position she held until her retirement in 1946.

The Maryknoll Sisters sent its first two Sisters into the field to work among Japanese immigrants on the west coast of the United States in 1920. In July 1921, six Sisters left to undertake mission work in China. Focused primarily on sending missionaries to the Orient and Latin America, the Sisters also worked with ethnic and racial groups in the United States.

Significant Contribution to Christianity in the United States

Even into the beginning of the 20th century, foreign missionary service was a fairly new concept for American Catholics. Mother Mary Joseph’s vision to create the Maryknoll Sisters, awakened the need for missionaries in the American Catholic Church.

Mother Mary Joseph received three honorary doctorate degrees, including one from her alma mater, Smith College.

Mother Mary Joseph died on Oct. 9, 1955, in New York City. At the time of her death, the Maryknoll Sisters had sent more than 1,100 women throughout the world to serve as foreign missionaries.

Resources and References

LaVerdiere, Claudette. 2011. *On the Threshold of the Future*. Maryknoll: NY. Orbis Books.

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