A History of the Ursulines of the Eastern Province: 1854-2006

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The Ursuline Provinciate celebrates 150 Years of Ursuline presence that started in the New York area and became the Eastern Province.
In May of 1854, the rural village of Melrose, adjacent to East Morrisania and a few miles north of Manhattan, comprised some 2,500 souls. Most were German-speaking, semi-skilled immigrants. They were being served by the new German national parish of the Immaculate Conception, and they needed teachers for their children.

Enter Mother Magdalen Stehlin, an Ursuline sister. Six years earlier, she had migrated from Europe to St. Louis, MO, to answer precisely the same need. Now she and two sisters headed East to establish a school in the rural environs north of the rapidly growing city of New York.

They were not the first of their order to undertake such a mission. Four decades earlier, in 1812, three Irish Ursulines had established a school in New York but had returned to County Cork three years later when it became clear that there was little chance of attracting vocations from among the daughters of the poor Irish Catholics they were serving. Vocations were required for success, but vocations also required a dowry, requiring family financial support. But Mother Magdalen was not so handicapped, and by the autumn of 1855, eleven sisters, novices, and postulants had arrived from St. Louis and from Europe to support the East Morrisania mission.

**Foundation in Morrisania**

Just two years later, a four-story building looked down on the East River and Long Island Sound—The Ursuline Convent of St. Joseph—and it was in business, charging $140 per year for board and tuition at the new Ursuline Academy.

At the same time, over several years in the 1870s, Ursulines received financial aid from the city of New York for a “free school” for poor children.

The 1860 U. S. Census lists sixteen nuns; a decade later, the number had grown to fifty.

In the fifteen years after its foundation, the Ursuline’s East Morrisania mission seems to have evolved from serving a German-speaking population to one of largely Irish Catholic young women, some of whom joined the community. Nevertheless, Immaculate Conception parish continued to be predominantly German.

In 1869, the Ursulines were asked to begin a parochial school in the nearby Mott Haven parish of St. Jerome’s. They undertook the work, for several years commuting by curtained carriage.

Eventually, they also opened St. Jerome’s Academy, a small private school for girls in 1882. The Ursuline custom of establishing a tuition-paying academy while also teaching in a parochial school provided them with financial independence from bishops and pastors.

Unlike parochial schools serving ethnic minorities, the mid-nineteenth century private schools such as the Ursuline Academy...
tended to have more diversity among their students—evidence of a prospering Catholic middle class with goals of educating its daughters. The student body included Cuban and Central American, as well as Irish and German students.

As New York City began annexing nearby communities in the 1870s, neighborhoods took on new characteristics. The Morrisania area was impacted by increased railroad service. Mott Haven grew with numerous iron foundries and piano factories. A number of breweries were operating in the area. These were no longer rural areas. In addition, the Ursuline community and student body had greatly increased in numbers.

Adapting to the reality of their situation, the nuns, following St. Angela’s directive to change with the times, began looking beyond the current convent walls—walls that shook with increasing rail and carriage traffic—where the air was laden with coal dust and factory emissions.

During these years of expansion, a group of ten nuns from East Morrisania went to Decatur, IL, in 1872, to staff a parochial school but stayed only one year. In 1877, Ursulines from East Morrisania took charge of a parish school and academy in St. Mary’s parish in Providence, RI. It was destined to last only twelve years. Distance from the mother community was cited as the cause of its failure. At the same time, eager to participate in missionary activity, the East Morrisania community sent volunteers to new Ursuline foundations in British Guiana (1879) and with Native Americans in Montana (1880s).

**Expansion to Manhattan and Beyond**

In November, 1873, Rev. James Boyce, whose sister, Mother Agnes, was a member of the East Morrisania community, asked for some Ursulines to staff the parochial school of his new parish, St. Teresa’s in lower Manhattan. Nine sisters went to 139 Henry Street and started a girls’ department. The parish prospered, and the school prospered. The Ursulines followed custom and opened a girls’ academy at 137 Henry Street and the incorporated Convent of St. Teresa’s followed—all within ten years.

In 1883, St. Teresa’s Ursulines established a Normal School to train teachers for the burgeoning parish and public schools of New York. With the Normal School, Ursulines undertook the education of adults, and the initiative had results in the success of its students in the State qualifying exams. Among all their new educational works, this venture extended the Ursuline ministry from the education of children and adolescents to include young women at the postsecondary level, a development that later would continue in the founding of a college.

As the area around East Morrisania continued to be industrialized, the nuns decided on relocation; they settled on the developing Bronx area called Bedford Park. Convent schools in urban and suburban areas were attracting more day students and fewer boarders, so that proximity to newly extended public transportation made Bedford Park attractive for potential day students.

Building was started in 1891, and a four-story academy and convent formally opened on May 31, 1892. It became known as the Academy of Mount St. Ursula. It offered elementary and high school classes for boarding and day students and special opportunities in music and art.

In the summer of 1893, the Bishop of Wilmington, DE,
asked the Bedford Park community for nuns to staff an already existing academy in his diocese. By September, nine nuns were ready to begin classes at the Ursuline Academy on Delaware Avenue. Within a decade, six of the nine relinquished their ties to Bedford Park and established themselves as an autonomous community in Wilmington.

Just before the turn of the century, a small group of Ursuline nuns from Chatham, Ontario, led by Mother Stanislaus Janisse, arrived in the northern New York village of Malone. They opened an elementary and high school and named it St. Joseph’s in 1899. Like downstate Ursulines, they taught in English children of both English-speaking and non-English-speaking families. Tuition was occasionally farm produce.

**Ursuline Unity in the Roman Union**

The beginning of the twentieth century was a whirlwind of Ursuline activity.

In 1900 the Roman Union was founded by an invitation from Pope Leo XIII that Ursulines unite into a single institute. Ironically, neither the Bedford Park nor the St. Teresa’s community sent representatives to the event in Rome. It seems that, in at least one case, Archbishop Michael Corrigan had failed to forward the letter of invitation to the convent. By 1901, however, both communities had joined the international union of Ursuline convents, as had the community in Wilmington.

In the half-century that followed the Ursulines’ arrival in New York, more than 100 women from Europe, Canada, and the U.S. had entered an Ursuline convent in St. Louis, East Morrisania, St. Teresa’s, Bedford Park, and their branch houses.

Their Ursuline superiors had been confronted with debts, negotiations with bishops and pastors, the training and assignment of too few sisters to too many functions. In some cases difficult climate, inadequate housing and finances, disagreements with pastors, and illness among community members added extra burdens.

By 1904, the golden anniversary of the 1854 arrival in New York of the Ursuline presence, seven academies (Mount St. Ursula, Middletown, Ursuline Academy on Park Avenue, and Ursuline Seminary in New Rochelle, Ursuline Academy in Wilmington, and St. Jerome’s) were in existence. The College of St. Angela in New Rochelle was beginning. Ursulines were staffing parochial schools and / or providing religious instruction in Middletown, St. Teresa’s downtown, the Bronx, and New Rochelle.

In 1904 the College of St. Angela—destined to become the College of New Rochelle—began classes in Leland Castle, which had been purchased by Mother Irene Gill seven years earlier. It was the
first Catholic college for women in the State of New York.

The Ursuline Seminary, a secondary school for girls vacated the space in Leland Castle and relocated nearby as the Merici School for Girls—part of an odyssey towards ultimately becoming The Ursuline School.

Nuns in the St. Teresa's community at the College, who had also been giving religious instruction at New Rochelle's Blessed Sacrament parish, in 1911 reopened the parish parochial school that had been closed when the church was destroyed by fire some fifteen years earlier.

Ursulines in Malone had opened a day and boarding school that evolved into St. Joseph's Ursuline Academy, chartered by New York State in 1904.

In 1905, the Northern Province of the Roman Union was formed, and it included communities in New York, Delaware, Nebraska, Montana, Idaho, California, and Washington State.

Mother St. Julien Aubry, first Prioress General of the Roman Union of Ursulines, arrived in 1906 for the first canonical visitation to the United States. Since, at this time, each community was autonomous, there was no exchange of personnel to staff schools; because of this, they were staffed by the founding community. Members of the community entered, lived, worked, and died in the particular monastery or a branch house. Loyalties and affiliation were to the local convent. The monastic tradition of cloister and religious practices such as the recitation of the Office followed local customs, and these might vary among autonomous communities.

The significance of this first visitation lay in its providing knowledge of the many monasteries of the new Roman Union that in the 1920s would evolve into a functioning single province with personnel becoming provincial rather than local subjects, and with customs and practices in common across the province, rather than specific to the individual community.

A series of changes started with a move of Ursulines from California to Maryland in 1904. This move, over the next two decades, led to a firm presence of the Order in Maryland and then in Washington, DC. These sisters joined the Roman Union in 1922.

Continuing the growth of the recently constituted Province, Mother Irene Gill, the newly appointed (1909) Provincial, purchased property on the fast-growing Grand Concourse in the Bronx...
to locate the offices of the Provincialate. The Ursuline Academy, until then located on Park Avenue in Manhattan, soon relocated to the Grand Concourse as well, and the community was designated a branch house of the St. Teresa’s community in New Rochelle.

While this was happening, in 1910, the Ursulines in Malone in upstate New York entered the Roman Union as part of the Northern Province. And in the Bronx, sisters were invited to staff the girls’ department at Our Lady of Mercy school in 1907.

During these changes, Mother Irene Gill was provincial. Her successor, Mother Regis McMahon was provincial superior between 1915 and 1921. In 1921 a fire destroyed the province novitiate near Fishkill, NY. A property in Beacon, NY, called Hiddenbrooke, became the new novitiate. Once again, Mother Irene Gill assumed the role of Provincial of the Northern Province and served for the next six years.

In 1923 the Ursulines in Malone began staffing the new Notre Dame parochial school.

The year 1926 is a significant one in the history of the Ursulines because of the election of Mother St. Jean Martin as Prioress General. She would go on to serve in that capacity for the next thirty-three years during which time she would centralize the authority structure of the Roman Union.

In 1928, The Ursulines of the Roman Union around the world became “province subjects.” In practice that meant that sisters could be moved from one community to another within a province. Ursulines within and across provinces became unified in policies and customs.

The Merici School for Girls in New Rochelle, originally the Ursuline Seminary, moved to property on North Avenue in 1929, assuming a new name, The Ursuline School. Commuting each day to the school, the nuns lived in the community of St. Teresa’s at the College of New Rochelle until 1953, when they became the Community of St. Ursula, residing in the White House on the school property. Their residence, the Convent of St. Ursula, was built in 1957.

As Ursulines in America grew and their educational ministry expanded, the Western Vice-Province was created in 1930, and new boundaries for the Eastern Province were drawn, encompassing communities from South Carolina to upstate New York. The Eastern Province opened a Provincial House of Studies in the Washington, DC area.

**Ursuline Method of Education**

In 1935, the sisters celebrated the 400th anniversary year of the founding of the Company of St. Ursula.

With Europe in 1939 already locked in war, Mother St. Jean, unable to leave the U.S., brought together an educational congress with Ursulines from the U.S., Cuba, and Mexico. Held at the College of New Rochelle in 1940, the congress provided both a forum for the ideas later published in *Ursuline Method of Education* (1940) and a revival of Ursuline educational ideals. Under Mother St. Jean’s leadership, Ursuline education was strengthened, particularly because of her extended presence in the U.S. during World War II and the dissemination of her book.
In 1939, St. Mary's, a residence for sisters of many congregations studying at Fordham University, was opened on the grounds of the Academy of St. Ursula; it was staffed by Ursulines of the province. It provided housing for sister students, and later it was used in turn for an Ursuline community and for the Provincialate.

An interprovincial House of Studies opened on the campus of the College of New Rochelle in 1943. This brought together young sisters from the four provinces of the United States after their novitiate formation. Here they combined the spiritual with the apostolic life as they studied either for the baccalaureate degree at CNR or, if they already had that degree, for the master’s degree at Fordham University. These “juniors,” as they were called, became familiar figures on the campus of CNR and around the St. Teresa community as they interacted across provincial boundaries.

The Ursuline Academy on the Grand Concourse temporarily closed in 1946. Nuns were sent to Boston where, at the invitation of Richard Cardinal Cushing, Archbishop of Boston, they founded the Ursuline Academy on Arlington Street. The Grand Concourse Academy re-opened in 1952 but closed permanently ten years later.

An elementary school was opened in Bethesda, MD, in 1949. Within seven years it had expanded, and the community established a high school, the Ursuline Academy. In 1960, a new convent was built. Only in 1976, when changes in ministry reduced available Ursulines for schools, was the Academy closed.

With the war over and the reconstruction of Europe, the Roman tertianship (that is, a third formation) drew nuns from the Eastern Province to this opportunity in 1950 and thereafter. There they participated with sisters from the many Ursuline communities around the world and traveled after the tertianship, gaining, firsthand, a consciousness of the international dimensions of the Order.

Mount St. Ursula Speech Center was founded in 1961 to provide at-risk children who have speech and hearing disabilities with the technical support to learn necessary skills.

The Ursuline Provincialate celebrates 150 years of Ursuline presence that started in the New York area and became the Eastern Province.
Vatican II and the Search for Roots

The Second Vatican Council opened in 1962 under the leadership of Pope John XXIII, and aggiornamento swept through the Church. Vatican II encouraged religious to reclaim their roots and to rediscover their charism, all of which led to other changes in light of the reexamination of their mission. For the Ursulines, discovering the history of the Company of St. Ursula gave them new insights about their heritage and mission. Planning and governance in the Province became more participatory and led, in the '70s and '80s, to experimentation with new forms of community and the choice of ministries other than, but still along with education. The Ursulines changed rules concerning cloister, their habit, a tiered system of choir and lay nuns, their title, “Mother,” and substituted English for Latin in the Office. At this time of change, some Ursulines chose to leave the Order for other life forms and professions, and the number of new vocations to the Order declined.

In 1976, St. Joseph’s Academy in Malone and Ursuline Academy in Bethesda closed. Three years later, Ursulines withdrew from St. Jerome’s in the Bronx. New things were happening as well. In that same year, Songcatchers was created, a new ministry to educate disadvantaged children in choral and instrumental music.

In 1986, The Marian Residence for the care of the elderly and infirm sisters of the province was established in the Convent of St. Ursula. For the first time, Sisters from the various houses of the Province were gathered in one place with the mission of caring for their health needs, rather than duplicating services in each community.

In 1986 and 1987, Ursulines withdrew from Our Lady of Mercy and St. Angela’s schools.

While the remaining schools continued the heritage of education as an Ursuline ministry, at this time new ministries were initiated. In 1991, Sojourner’s Place in Wilmington opened to provide shelter and social services to homeless men and women, while the Ursuline Academy in Wilmington continued its educational mission.

In 1997, the Adult Learning Center of Ursuline Social Outreach in New Rochelle was dedicated to educate new populations of adults in English language, reading, and work skills. Angela House in the Bronx, in 1999, opened its doors to provide transitional housing for homeless mothers and their children.

In addition to these new Ursuline ministries, individual sisters chose new professions, working outside Ursuline institutions, in law, nursing, social service, parish work, spiritual direction, music, art and writing, pastoral care, and services to promote social justice for the disadvantaged of society. In education, some Ursulines worked outside the schools of the Province in special education, parochial schools, and higher education.
The relocation of the elderly infirm sisters in 2005 from the province-run Marian Residence to Andrus on Hudson, a long-term care community, marked a rethinking of the care of the retired and elderly infirm. At this time, planning in the Province accelerated as adaptation to changes in society as well as Province demographics took on greater importance.

Through all these developments over time, the spectrum of service broadened into an array of Ursuline presence and ministries characterizing the Ursulines as they marked their 150th anniversary. At the same time Ursulines are forging a vision of religious life for adapting to the changes on the horizon for the Church and the world.

Martha Counihan, O.S.U. and Alice Gallin, O.S.U. prepared an historical text and timeline of the 150-year history of the Ursulines of the Eastern Province. Douglas Hearle revised and edited the 1855-1900 section. Bridget Puzon, O.S.U., wrote the section from 1900 to the present, based on the timeline. She also edited the texts.

Martha Counihan, O.S.U., Therese McMahon, O.S.U., and Marcia Kimball, O.S.U. selected photographs from the archives of the College of New Rochelle, the Bedford Park Community, and the Provincialate (respectively), and worked with Catherine Y. Giles to assemble images to illustrate Ursuline history.