

# Printing for Providence

PAUL JAY explores the history behind the Printing Room Museum at the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul in Kingston, Ontario.

*In the beginning was the Word, and  
the Word was with God . . .*

—John 1:1

JOHN'S ACCOUNT OF the life of Jesus tells us that the Word was with God from the beginning, but with the development of moveable type and the printing press in the 15th century, Johannes Gutenberg found a way to take the word of God into the world. His first major printed work was the Bible, and his new business enterprise enabled the widespread dissemination of God's word.

More than four centuries later, in December 1861, as the Civil War was beginning in the United States, a small delegation from the Sisters of Providence in Montreal arrived in Kingston, Ontario, to establish a new religious congregation that would eventually become known as the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul. The following years saw some local women join the order, which focused on helping the poor in Kingston, but by 1866 the French sisters were recalled to Montreal. The local bishop, Edward Horan, appointed Sister Mary Edward to be the first general superior of the congregation. While the Kingston sisters continued to depend on Montreal for prayer books, periodicals and other printed materials, many of these were printed in French. It became evident that English materials printed specifically for the congregation's use would assist greatly, providing them with devotional materials in their own language and that of the community in which they worked.

In 1893, Sister Mary Gabriel took a leadership role in driving this initiative. She sought guidance from various outside experts on what would be needed to equip a modest printing facility for the congregation's internal needs. The estimated cost was \$480, and in 1897 the congregation's council approved the establishment of a printing department, with the aim of economically producing necessary materials such



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*Sisters Mary Emile and Mary Daniel operating the  
Linotype machine in November 1946.  
(Courtesy of the Archives, Sisters of Providence  
of St. Vincent de Paul)*

as circulars and obituary notices. Unfortunately, the approval did not provide any allocation for supplies or equipment, and so the congregation turned its enterprising energies to a fundraising campaign, which included raffling off a donated gold watch. Combining the raffle proceeds of \$410 with some other contributions, the sisters were able to purchase their first press.

This first wave of investment brought them a Gordon-type platen press manufactured in Toronto by Westman & Baker, together with around 280 pounds of type, a California type cabinet, ink, an imposing stone, and other essential equipment and supplies. Operated by treadle and foot-power, the press could print an area of up to 10 × 15 inches at a rate approaching 2,000 impressions an hour.

## A SILENT, MEDITATIVE CRAFT

An early photograph shows Mother Mary Gabriel with the Westman & Baker press. Mother Mary Gabriel was formerly Mary Elizabeth Cunningham of Kingston, where her



*Clockwise from left: Westman & Baker press; The maker's plate of the Westman & Baker press; Mother Mary Gabriel with the Westman & Baker platen press, date unknown.  
(Courtesy of the Archives, Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul)*

father was a local businessman. She had joined the order early in its existence. Her presence and contributions within the community were soon noticed, and her leadership earned her a series of significant positions through the years of her religious life. She was general secretary of the order from 1888 to 1907, and in that capacity was responsible for the print materials of the order. After being elected superior general in 1907, she filled that office for six years. By the time Mother Gabriel passed away in 1946, many of the other sisters had become involved in the activities of the printing office.

The photographs of the sisters in their habits and distinctive peaked wimples make it is easy to forget that they could be just as susceptible to the fascination of this graphic medium as the rest of us who have been attracted to the world of letterpress printing. The smell of the ink, the tactile sensation of manipulating a row of lead characters, and the wonder of transforming a pile of cut sheets into one of printed pages is a temptation for the senses. Yet anyone who has hand-set lead type will confess that there is a certain meditative aspect to the process of holding a sentence in your mind and fingering the individual characters one at a time as the line is

created, not unlike the reflection associated with a rosary. For most of the day the sisters would have worked in silence, but the act of typesetting inevitably triggers an internal dialogue. Perhaps like Gutenberg they were also motivated by the fulfillment of using this artistic technology as a path towards spiritual enlightenment, both for themselves and for their charges.

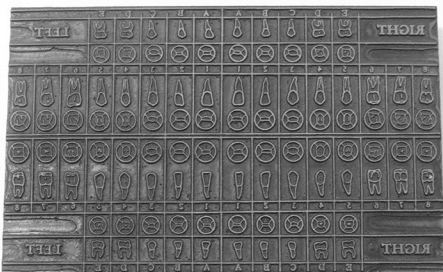
#### ADVENT OF A CHILDREN'S MONTHLY

By early January 1899, the sisters had completed their first printed work, a selection of *Monthly Meditations* for use within the community as well as by the infirmary and associated missions. Having established and demonstrated their capability, they soon found that there was a local market for printing services. They were able to generate income to support their operating costs and mission needs by printing items for outside companies, such as award certificates, job application forms and promotional materials. The congregation's archives show samples of handbills for candidates in an election for alderman as well as various editions of a two-colour menu for a Chinese restaurant. There is also a chart for the Frontenac Dental Laboratory, used to record details collected during dental examinations.

As their skills developed, so did the sisters' ambitions, and in January 1916 Sister Mary Francis Regis wrote to her fellow sisters:

I would like to encourage a project inaugurated by Mrs. Henry Smith of Kingston, viz: the Publishing of 'The Catholic Guardian', a Sunday School Paper for children. It has the approval of His Grace, The Archbishop, and the Priests of the City. This generous Lady purposes to issue the Journal monthly at the rate of once cent each per copy. A number of copies will be mailed to you about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Inst. for distribution among the children of your school. The object of this most worthy enterprise is two-fold: 1st to afford good, wholesome literature for Sunday reading; 2nd to assist financially the Orphanage at St. Mary's of the Lake. The proceeds from the sale of the papers is to be given to the Orphanage. The price is so low I do not think there will be any objection to its publication throughout our Schools.

The monthly paper contained articles by and for children of the various schools and parishes connected with the Sisters of Providence. It eventually grew to a circulation of around 1,845 copies a month, before production was discontinued sometime after March 1959. Production costs were subsidized by the inclusion of advertisements for local businesses and events. However, issuing a 16-page, three-column paper on a monthly basis placed new demands on the industry of the printing sisters, and eventually



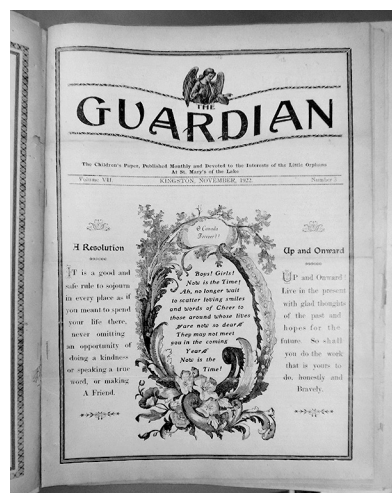
Block used for printing dental chart.

they began to invest in additional equipment to further amplify the impact of their efforts.

Just around the time that the Sisters of Providence were printing their first works, Ellen Olive Baker was born in Bristol, England. While still young she immigrated with her parents to Lachine, Quebec. As a young adult, Olive realized where her calling lay, but did not feel drawn to any of the religious communities she knew in Montreal. So instead she responded to suggestions from three of her mother's brothers, who were all members of the Redemptorist order around Brockville, where they had seen the work of the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul at the hospital there. A few days before her 24th birthday, Baker was received as a postulant. Two years later she made her profession as Sister Mary Daniel. She would work in the printing room for 17 years, from 1932 to 1949. Here she discovered a special delight in the work of publishing the *Guardian* children's paper in aid of the orphanage of St. Mary's of the Lake in Kingston.

#### FRESH TALENT & TECHNOLOGY

Philomena Martina Genore was born in Otter Creek, Ontario, in October 1909 as one of a family of nine children. She studied in school up to Grade 9, and after entering the order she worked hard to improve her English (since her



Front page of the *Guardian* monthly paper edited and printed by the Sisters of Providence.  
(Paul Jay photo)



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*Sister Mary Daniel operating the Linotype machine in November 1946. (Courtesy of the Archives, Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul)*

language at home had always been French). She made her profession in March 1937 as Sister Mary Emile and was assigned to work in the printing shop with Sister Mary Daniel, learning the whole end-to-end process of print production. She also took a course on bookbinding from the Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns) of Montreal and was able to put that skill to good use at the House of Providence Printing Office. Sister Mary Emile was almost continuously involved in the printing activities from about 1937 to at least 1968. Apparently she was something of a perfectionist and would receive high praise for the various jobs she did for the parish and the community as well as occasionally for city businesses.

In addition to producing the 16-page *Guardian* each month and a wide variety of other documents for the congregation's internal needs and community involvements, the Sisters also undertook monthly production of *The Canadian League*. This magazine was distributed across Canada to members of the Catholic Women's League, an organization federally incorporated in 1923. This engagement ended sometime before 1947.

In 1927 Mother Mary Gabriel realized that the Sisters could take advantage of new technology to increase the productivity of their little print shop, and they made a major investment to purchase one of the spectacular Linotype machines invented by Ottmar Mergenthaler around the turn of the century. Now their long hours of tedious manual typesetting and type distribution would



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*Miehle Vertical v-50 press purchased in September 1954. (Paul Jay photo)*

be condensed into shorter periods of keyboard operation, as the machine turned ingots of lead into ready-set rows of type for the columns of their magazines. Evidence of their command of the situation is shown by an iconic photograph from November 1946 showing Sister Mary Daniel at the Linotype keyboard, with Sister Mary Emile looking over her shoulder, both wearing their traditional habits. Their mode of dress would defy current safety standards for operators of this type of equipment, which involves many moving parts and crucibles of molten lead! Perhaps as the Linotype machine's lead crucible was being heated up in their print room, Sisters Mary Daniel and Mary Emile would reflect on the story of Daniel and the fiery furnace.

Another addition to their armoury of equipment was an electrically powered Miehle Vertical v-50 press. Purchased in September 1954 from the Toronto Type Foundry, it offered a much greater throughput of printed pages than the treadle platen. The press had the potential to print a 12½ × 19-inch image onto a 14 × 20-inch sheet with ease and do up to 25,000 impressions a day. The sisters now had three presses (the "Gordon" press, a proofing press and the v-50) and doubtless the noise level in the printing office had increased considerably, especially whenever the Miehle and the Linotype might be operating together.

### THE PRINTING ROOM'S FINAL YEARS

Over its nine decades of operation, from 1899 to 1989, as many as 20 sisters participated in the printing office, working at typesetting and distribution, proofreading, printing, bookbinding and other functions. Starting around 1930, they were also supported by a series of male lay workers. From the mid-1950s Sister Mary Emile was managing the press room almost single-handedly, and so around this time Sister Margaret Haughian (who worked in the business office at the House of Providence) asked her brother, Stephen Haughian, to come and help. He became heavily involved and eventually ran most of the equipment for the final 30 years of the room's operation. Stephen Haughian was also a sibling to Sister Anne Louise Haughian, who was another member of the same order but who spent most of her religious life in Western Canada, moving in the mid-1980s to the House of Providence, where she is still alive today at age 103.

The advent of computers and desktop publishing in the early 1980s was soon recognized as a less costly and more time-effective solution to the many printing needs that the printing office fulfilled. Coincident with some aging of the present equipment, it was decided to close down the printing operations in 1989. However, the Sisters of Providence chose to keep the equipment in place and in 1999 reopened the room as a printing museum, which may now be visited by appointment. Today, within the sturdy grey stone walls of Providence Manor on Ordnance Street in Kingston stands Our Mother of Sorrows Chapel.

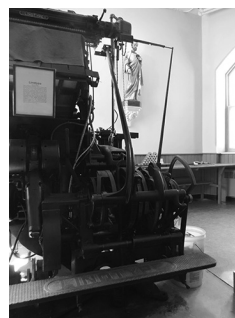
In the basement is a well-laid-out museum that captures many elements of the technology used by the sisters over almost a century. Museum visitors can see the original presses, drawers of printer's type and blocks, the Linotype machine and other equipment as well as many examples of the type of work the press produced. The museum displays offer a deeper understanding of the kind of activity that would have made the room such a busy place for 90 years, within a unique environment. The ensemble of the equipment stands as a testament to the industry of the many sisters who laboured there, silently working at communicating their faith to a greater population, by thought, word and deed.

*Indeed, the word of God is alive and active,  
sharper than any two-edged sword.*  
—Hebrews 4:12

### VISITING THE MUSEUM

To arrange a tour of the Printing Room Museum, contact the archivist of the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul by phone, (613) 544-4525, x147, or e-mail [archives@providence.ca](mailto:archives@providence.ca).

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~ Paul Jay is a retired engineer/physicist living in Ottawa, Ontario. He has indulged in letterpress printing since his early teens, and still has a print shop with five letterpress machines and a miscellany of type.



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*Left to right: The print office, circa 1940. (Courtesy of the Archives, Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul); St Joseph watching over the Linotype and ingots. (Paul Jay photo); Exterior of the chapel that houses the museum. (Paul Jay photo)*