Thomas Connolly, Bishop of the Diocese of New Brunswick in 1852, recognized the vulnerability of the Catholic faith in a city where half of the population was Catholic, yet Saint John only provided Protestant schools. During this time, tens of thousands of destitute immigrants were arriving in Saint John annually from Ireland. Concerned, he began negotiating with the Sisters of Charity of New York to provide Sisters to Saint John. Unable to spare the personnel, the New York Sisters did offer to train some young women from Saint John, so that they could eventually return and establish a separate foundation.

While the novices were studying in New York, one of the ships from Liverpool in 1854, the “Blanche” carried cholera, and that summer it’s estimated that 2500 people died. Within six weeks, Bishop Connolly found himself in charge of 70 orphans. In September of 1854 the four women training in New York; Honoria Conway (Mother Vincent co-foundress) Mary Routane, Mary Madden and Annie McCabe returned to Saint John and set up an orphanage.

They took their vows in October and accepted the Rule of the Sisters of Charity of Saint John as drawn up by the Bishop. These four saw the face of Christ in the faces of their bedraggled orphan charges and in responding to their spiritual and physical needs, came to know and to inspire in others, the sustaining spirit of charity. Their work took them out into the heart of a city still reeling from the cholera epidemic, teeming with thousands of destitute immigrants. They were the first English-speaking, Roman Catholic religious congregation founded in Canada.

By 1855 they had 10 members, 300 children attending school and about 500 children receiving catechetical instruction as they expanded throughout the city. Recruits to the new community came gradually and steadily and in 1859 there were 27 sisters operating five schools, including one in the Acadian (French) parish of Saint-Basile-de-Madawaska, which enjoyed success even though it was conducted in English.

Immigration to Atlantic Canada started to decline in the late 19th century and with the completion of the railroad it increased in the west. The Sisters responded to an invitation to Prince Albert Saskatchewan to administer to an orphanage, but quickly became involved in healthcare by establishing the first hospital there in 1910. From there the Sisters quickly responded to the needs of the people and expanded across Canada establishing a variety of apostolates in healthcare, orphanages and schools.

Vatican II (1960s) prompted the Sisters to look beyond the rules and restraints of the Order and they made changes both personally and structurally. They now saw religious life as a gift to others and as an apostolic congregation became more flexible in responding to the needs of the world around them. They found roles within the diocese, within parishes and on the streets. They expanded their ministries to include social justice, advocacy and support for immigrants and women’s groups, care of the environment, faith formation, literacy, pastoral care, affordable housing, food banks and soup kitchens.

Since then, they have established missions in Peru and are active members of the Sisters of Charity Foundation. The Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH) come from the collaboration between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. These two saints inspired Elizabeth Seton to found the first Sisters of Charity U.S. in 1809.