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Jubilee 100 Biography Project

Biography of Helen Biltek

Submitted by St. Anthony Parish, Edmonton

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Helen Biltek has been involved in the life of St. Anthony's parish in Edmonton since 1947. She is a lay woman who offered the skills that she honed in her professional life in the service of her church and her community. Over the 65 years of her involvement much has changed in the parish and the Church at large. Not the least of these was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) that ushered in numerous changes in the pastoral tone, liturgy and theology of the Church, affording greater opportunities for involvement for the laity, especially women. A witness to and participant in many of these changes, Helen Biltek has shared her charism for administration, manifest in her concern that things run smoothly, whether it is the chapter of the Catholic Women's League (CWL), the preparation of readers for the liturgy or the parish office.

Born on 25 June 1928 to the Mucha family in Rabbit Hill, Alberstat, Helen recalls a childhood of economic hardship. Her parents were part of the successive waves of Ukrainian settlers to Western Canada. Neither her mother, who emigrated to Canada from the Ukraine, nor her father, born to Ukrainian parents in the new province of Alberta, had the opportunity to go beyond a Grade 3 education. Helen herself completed nine years at Rabbit Hill school and two years at MacDougall Commercial High School. Helen was baptized and confirmed in the Ukrainian Catholic Church. Growing up, Helen, her parents and brother could journey to church in town only twice a year because travel was difficult and costly. Nevertheless, the family knelt and prayed nightly at home in Ukrainian. It was only after she was married that Helen became regularly involved in parish life.

In 1946, shortly before her 18th birthday, Helen married Alex Biltek. Together they had one son, David, who was baptized at old St. Anthony's, just months before the new church opened up on Whyte Avenue in 1949. Professionally, Helen worked as a secretary and administrative assistant, starting at the Baker medical clinic when she was 17 and retiring from the University of Alberta's Department of Physics, where she had worked as an administrative assistant.

Helen brought her skills in organization and administration to St. Anthony's. A natural entry point into parish life was membership in the CWL: over 51 years, Helen has held a variety of positions in the executive. It was also as a representative of the CWL that Helen became the first woman on the newly formed parish council. She went on to chair the second council. Successive parish pastors also found Helen's administrative and secretarial skills extremely useful: Helen typed and produced the Sunday bulletin from the late 1950s to 1978; she typed the correspondence for two pastors (Fr. Bonner and Msgr. Foran); and after her retirement, at the age of 75, agreed to work part-time as the parish secretary and later, office manager.



Organizational, pastoral and liturgical changes ushered in by the Second Vatican Council presented new opportunities and challenges to St. Anthony's parish. Churches were now expected to establish parish councils. At St. Anthony's Msgr. C. Foran had been used to running the parish for almost 20 years with a few trustees - prominent men in the community. Consequently, he found the new requirement challenging. After much discussion and debate, when the parish council was finally formed it even included women. Helen was on that first council as the CWL rep. With her attention for administrative detail, Helen was not afraid to ask awkward questions. There was the dealership next door that leased land from the parish. How much, Helen wanted to know, did the parish make from that? Her investigations revealed that the money the parish made from the leased land did not even cover the property taxes. When Helen became chair of the next council, she saw the need for meeting space for parish organizations. She urged Msgr. Foran to allow these groups to use rooms in the neighbouring houses that the parish owned. Instead the houses were sold shortly after this request was made, much to Helen's dismay.

Much of Helen's work at the parish has been attending to details that often go unnoticed until they are left undone. Hours have been spent preparing bulletins, collecting baked goods for the coffee after the mass, sewing liturgical decorations, cleaning the pews, even oiling the altar. In the early days after Vatican II Helen helped work out many unforeseen details. For example, Helen reminded some of the first women lectors, who all wore skirts or dresses at the time, to make sure that their slips did not show when they processed with the lectionary. Sometimes the details became issues of justice. Helen argued vehemently for the right of a physically disabled parishioner to read, when some on the liturgy committee thought that the disability might be a distraction to the congregation.

Looking back over the close to 70 years at St. Anthony's, Helen observes that people worked together more when there was a need. Thus, when the parish carried a debt, parishioners came together to organize fundraising events. Although Vatican II increased opportunities for lay involvement, Helen thinks that it has decreased over the years. Helen, however, has embraced the new opportunities offered her. When she first became involved in the parish, she was not allowed to set foot into the "inner sanctum," neither of the church sanctuary nor the parish offices. In the church, the communion rails disappeared, and now Helen can step into the sanctuary when she serves as a Eucharistic minister. Today Helen not only sets foot in the office - she runs it.