



The Catholic  
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Joy in Christ  
**100** Jubilee  
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## Jubilee 100 Biography Project

### Biography of the Grey Nuns of St. Albert

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It all began in 1857 when Bishop Alexandre Taché made a request to Mother Julie Deschamps, Superior of the Grey Nuns in Montreal. *"...there are so many needs in the far-west of Canada! Would you have Sisters ready to leave everything and come to the new mission of Lac Sainte-Anne?"* "Yes," she said. *"Our calling is to bring the Good News to all; however, there is one condition. Will you be able to provide for their spiritual needs and their daily bread?"* The Bishop replied, *"The missions are extremely poor; I cannot even assure you that the Sisters will have the necessities of life."* Mother answered, *"In this case, they shall fast along with the priests and the people and we shall ask God to help them."* This historic encounter was the foundation stone of a 'mission' that has provided for the needs of thousands of people. It also defined the commitment of the valiant missionary women.

On September 19, 1858, three Grey Nuns left Montreal en route to the West: Sister Emery (Zoé Leblanc), Sister Adèle Lamy, and Sister Alphonse (Marie Jacques). They reached Saint-Boniface, Manitoba, 42 days later. They remained there for nine months to acclimatize themselves and learn from the native people and their Grey Nun Sisters who had been there since 1844. Then the missionaries, accompanied by *Marie-Louise*, a young Métis interpreter, continued their journey for another 53 days.

The caravan arrived at Lac Sainte-Anne, Alberta, on September 24, 1859. Within a week, the Sisters had visited every family with Marie-Louise. They began to study the Cree language, taught school to both adults and children; visited and cared for the sick. Coming to share the labours of the missionaries and of the people, they also shared their poverty and the severity of the time. Painfully aware of the lamentable situation, Father Albert Lacombe, OMI, visited other sites searching for ministry and livelihood possibilities. He was successful in finding such a location which he named 'Saint-Albert Mission' and preparations were made for an eventual move to the promised land.

On March 23, 1863, the three Grey Nuns and Marie-Louise, having packed their meager belongings, bade adieu to their friends at Lac Sainte-Anne. They brought with them seven orphans and travelled the full day by cart to reach their home in St. Albert. Without delay, the Sisters opened a school, an orphanage and a rudimentary hospital. This *promised land* soon became a beehive of activity. Treasuring their mission of *"love at work"*, the preparation of future Grey Nuns also became a privileged responsibility for the Sisters as generous local young women came forth in faithful response to the gifts of the Spirit and in view of the mission.

It was in 1895 that the people of Fort Edmonton made a request to found a General Hospital because the Fort, situated some 10 kilometres south of St. Albert, had become the site of a major centre of activity for the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1908, the Edmonton General Hospital School of Nursing opened, followed by the School of Medical records, hence calling forth new challenges and important expansion. In 1967, the Grey Nuns' administrative seat and novitiate moved from St. Albert to the Grey Nuns Regional Centre in Edmonton. It incorporated the Conference and Retreat Centre which offered space for multiple workshops, retreats and pastoral activities to thousands of people.

Over the years, more than 50 faith-based mission ministries were established in the Northwest Territories, Alberta, Saskatchewan (Canada) and Zaire (Africa). In keeping with their charism and with boldness, the Grey Nuns led the way into our era of technology and passionately transmitted the flame of a mission of love, of faith and of service to all peoples.

Our missionary journey is an open-ended story with a past, a present and a future. Indeed, the legacy of love handed down to the Grey Nuns by their Foundress Marguerite d'Youville is not simply historical; it is ever vibrant. Today, as in the past, the Grey Nuns are blessed with a unique group of dedicated and caring women ready to serve and respond to the needs. Hence, to consider our mission yesterday, today and tomorrow, is to view the same mission carried out in different ways amid different peoples, in different times and in different locations. Indeed, our pride rests not in having been, but rather in being relevant for the times. It is as women of presence, women of prayer, women ministering in partnership with the laity and as advocates for the poor that we journey among, and in solidarity with the marginalized of a thousand faces.