



The Catholic
Archdiocese
of Edmonton

Joy in Christ
100 Jubilee
1912-2012

Jubilee 100 Biography Project

Biography of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity 1912-2012

Prepared by Sr. Norma Johnson, OLC Archivist, April 30, 2012

The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity were founded November 25, 1641, in Caen, Normandy, France, by Saint John Eudes. Saint John Eudes was profoundly touched and deeply concerned by the plight of so many young women and girls caught up in the ills of that society. Through prayer and much discernment he felt drawn to give refuge to those lost souls, and so in time he founded the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity. Our true vocation calls us to be Women of Compassion, Mercy, Charity, and most of all to have a great "Zeal for Souls," which is our fourth vow.

The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity in Edmonton came at the invitation of the Most Reverend Emile Legal OMI at the request of the Superintendent of Dependent and Delinquent Children, Mr. R. B. Chadwick of the Government of Alberta, Canada in 1912. Mr. Chadwick was responsible for the Province's welfare programs. In 1911 he visited various institutions in the United States in order to acquire information about various organizations, dealing with the care of problem women and girls. One of the places he visited was our Monastery in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and so inspired was he, that he asked Bishop Legal if it would be possible for those Sisters to start an institution in Edmonton.

As a result, on April 22, 1912, two Sisters arrived in Edmonton to begin our new Mission and Apostolate in the Archdiocese. They were Mother Mary of St. Leo Rohner (Superior) and Sister Mary of St. Aloysius Buck followed shortly afterwards by three more Sisters, Sister Mary Nativity Cahill, Sister Mary of the Annunciation Nolan, and Sister Mary of St. Veronica Gormley. Their first home at 296 Hardisty Avenue (now 111th Street) formerly housed the beginnings of the Misericordia Hospital. This house consisted of three cottages all joined together. Within just a few days in their new home, 20 older teenage girls were placed in their care by the government officials, and thus began the early work of charity of our Sisters in Edmonton.

Conditions were extremely discouraging and poor, but through the kindness of Bishop Legal, many priests and religious sisters came to their rescue, not to mention also so many faithful volunteers and benefactors.

On June 15, 1912, the first Mass was celebrated in their little chapel by the renowned Father Hippolytus Leduc OMI, Vicar General of the Diocese, and the Sisters were so happy that the Blessed Sacrament would be forever present from then on in their new Convent. This day is commemorated as the founding date of the Edmonton Community. Some months later, Sister Veronica Gormley was replaced by Sister Mary Alphonsus Hood because of her failing health.

In October of 1916 a fire struck all the buildings in Hardisty Avenue. While repairs were made to the building the Sisters lived at the Misericordia Hospital.

In 1917 Reverend Father R. P. Reynolds OMI was instrumental in forming the Ladies Auxiliary for our Sisters. Thus were born the famous "Lilac Teas," which were held each year for over 50 years, which made possible so many additional funds that provided for unexpected expenses and necessities right up until the late 1960s.

In the fall of 1918 while collecting funds in the Norwood District of Edmonton, the Sisters became aware of a large building for sale. The property formerly called "The Gospel Mission of All Nations" consisted of a church residence or rooming house on the corner of 96th Street and 114th Avenue. (11409 - 96th Street). In order to purchase the property and buildings, it was necessary for the Sisters to obtain a loan. On September 24, 1918, the deal was closed through the kindness of so many benefactors and friends. So on December 19 of that year, the Sisters and 43 girls moved from Hardisty Avenue to this new location with very grateful thanks to God and Our Lady of Charity.

The Official Formal Mass and Opening of the New Monastery took place in February 21, 1919. Once again Divine Providence followed the work of the Sisters in their mission, calling them to be healers of compassion and love to those under their care.

The effects of the First World War were being felt all around them at that time. In 1918 the Spanish Flu Epidemic brought a new request for the Sisters to open their hearts and doors to the many neglected and orphan little ones that were being abandoned. This was the beginning of our work with the orphans. On March 10, 1920, the Sisters were saddened with the news that Bishop Legal OMI died, as he had been such a faithful friend and Father to them. He was replaced by Archbishop Henry Joseph O'Leary, who turned out to be another special gift from God in their lives.

In September of 1921, an elementary school was established in the residence for the education of those under the Sisters' care. This was the beginning of St. Theresa's School, with Grades 1 through 7, made possible through the Edmonton Separate School Board, while the older girls at 96th Street attended Sacred Heart School or St. Mary's High School if they were allowed off the grounds. The residents (the older girls) that were confined to the premises were taught privately by the Sisters. Education was a high priority, even in those years, for all those under our care, and many Sisters were educated as teachers.

In order to provide financially for the many needs of the Community, especially the orphans, the Sisters used their many talents making church vestments, sacred linens, altar breads; they were known for their exceptional needlecraft gifts, embroidery, knitting, calligraphy, even tailoring and so much more. We also ran a large laundry. In those early years, we did the laundry for the Priests and Seminarians at St. Joseph Seminary, which was located at 9948 - 100 Street. Our Community has always had a very special respect and love for the priesthood. Our Holy Founder St. John Eudes founded the Congregation of Jesus and Mary (Eudist Fathers) for the formation and training for priests, way back in 1643.

Living conditions were cramped and all too small for those under our care because of the economic circumstances of those times. By 1927 there was 84 children separated from the class of delinquent women and girls who by then numbered 55. The mortgage on the property at 96th Street had not been paid off and there was no possibility of an expansion. However, so many generous men and women gave what they could to help the Sisters in those early trying years. The paternal kindness of the late Archbishop Legal and his successor Archbishop Henry O'Leary was a great incentive to the Sisters to trust in Divine Providence as they continued on and prayed for their future.

Mr. J.D. O'Connell, a wealthy philanthropist and a close friend to both Archbishop O'Leary and his childhood friend Mr. Frank Leger, was a poor boy from New Brunswick who became wealthy through sugar plantations which he acquired in Cuba. Mr. O'Connell had been coming to Edmonton for a number of years during the summer months as he sponsored special picnics for all the many orphan children in the city of Edmonton, giving them peanuts and pennies. However, it was Frank Leger who suggested to his friend on his visit in 1927, that he could do so much more with his money for those little ones in need. In that same year, Archbishop O'Leary introduced the Community to Mr. O'Connell, who had already earned for himself the title of the "Orphans' Friend." As Archbishop O'Leary was fully aware of the Sisters' plight, he suggested to Mr. O'Connell that he could do something about it. Mr. O'Connell was touched by the crowded conditions and quarters that the Sisters were living in and he decided to come to their rescue. As it happened the H.J. Dawson Estate was up for sale near the outskirts of the city in the district of Forest Heights, and it was then that he offered to help buy the 40 acres of land for them. This was truly an answer to the Sisters' prayers and by Easter of 1928 the Sisters received the welcome news that the property was theirs for the care of the little orphan girls.

As the weeks of preparation went on for that big move to the Dawson Estate, as it was known and called "Primrose Place" in the Forest Heights district, there was much excitement and hard work for all those concerned. Four Sisters were named Sister Mary of the Annunciation, Sister Joseph, Sister Mary Lourdes, and Sister Blessed Sacrament. Finally, the move took place with 93 small children. Making all this possible, was the generosity of our faithful many benefactors and friends. Furniture, bedding, dishes, lots of food, and everything you could imagine were transported to their new home in early September. The Catholic School Board had finished building their new St. Theresa's School with its three classrooms to also serve the Catholic children in the district. Two of our Sisters were assigned as teachers and a young lady as well. Mr. O'Connell visited the grounds for the first time, after the big move, on September 1 and was once again deeply edified by the love and kindness of all the Sisters. Then on September 8, Archbishop O'Leary opened and blessed the new home, dedicating it to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and naming the home the O'Connell Institute. On that same day, on those grounds Mr. O'Connell gave a picnic to 800 children gathered there to meet once again the Orphans' Friend for the customary scrabble for new pennies. It was a never to be forgotten day for many of the children and to witness the joy that Mr. O'Connell felt in his heart.

The 40 acres of property consisted of land from the northeast side of the Saskatchewan River to 79th Street, and going east-west 97th Avenue to 106th Avenue. This meant that travelling in those days, you would come from downtown across the Dawson Bridge (named after Mr. Dawson, as one of his coal mines was located there) and follow the muddy trail that would eventually lead you to his residence at that time, or you would be coming from the Low Level Bridge and follow the river bank way up the hill to around 101st Avenue, again on the grounds of his home.

There was a farm on the property already, which made it possible for the Sisters in time to purchase a couple of horses, cows, pigs, chickens, and lambs. The farm became a place and means of survival for all those little ones. The spacious surroundings provided lots of recreational activities. The Sisters, as time went on, also planted lots of rows of potatoes, turnips, carrots, and every vegetable you can think of, thus, providing for very nutritious, fresh, and wholesome meals. Life had taken on new opportunities for those little ones and their home was known in the community as a place of great peace and joy.

Life continued at 96th Street and 114th Avenue, which at this time consisted of eight Sisters. There was still the large laundry, the need for ongoing education for the 60 older girls, and a lot of daily supervision. Once again, our Sisters spent loving hours encouraging those under their care to improve themselves for the future. The spiritual needs for both the Sisters and the girls were generously provided by the Jesuits and Franciscan Fathers, not to mention the Priests at Sacred Heart Church. We were and have been forever blessed by the faithful kindness and support of so many of our diocesan clergy.

The Depression years laid heavily on everyone as they struggled to survive. Our numbers continued to grow, both with new vocations and our charges. Archbishop O'Leary died March 5, 1938, and we truly lost a forever dear, holy friend. Archbishop John Hugh MacDonald replaced him. This new spiritual leader was an educator promoting vocations, both to the priesthood and religious life.

At the O'Connell Institute, the number of children had increased to about a 110 little girls. And we were very fortunate over the years to have been blessed with the Pastoral Services of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate Priests, from St. John's College not far away. Lots of activities continued to be carried on for the children, such as music, dancing lessons, outside adventures, that made it possible that their home was truly a real home. This prompted Archbishop MacDonald to sponsor a campaign to raise funds for a new addition to the original Dawson house. So in time, plans were made for a new wing with lots more added space for the many needs of both the children and Sisters. This wing was then named after Archbishop MacDonald.

Also around this time at 96th Street and 114th Avenue they too were over crowded, so plans were being considered for either an expansion to the old buildings, or a new total move onto the grounds of the property in Forest Heights. The Sisters also realized that a new buyer was interested in this property which helped them greatly in this decision.

We may have started with 40 acres of land, but as the years went on, the city requested and purchased 20 acres of our land to build new roads, business and residential buildings, thus leaving us to own the property from 98th Avenue to 84th Street and then on to 101st Avenue. This is now the present piece of the property of the Archdiocese Pastoral and Administrative Offices, Newman Theological College and St. Joseph Seminary.

The O'Connell Institute continued to bring new life and hope into the hearts of so many little innocent souls. With the MacDonald addition and later on the McCuaig wing, our worked increased along with additional responsibilities. This two additions added dormitories, recreation facilities, a small wading pool, dining room, offices, guest rooms, and much more.

The overcrowding conditions of 96th Street and 114th Avenue encouraged us to consider to rebuild and move to the property at 101st Avenue in Forest Heights. Thus, on March 25, 1950, Archbishop MacDonald turned the sod for this new residence for the older girls and women, and the Sisters' Monastery. One year later, on September 5, 1951, the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Archbishop MacDonald offered Mass for our intentions and blessed this beautiful new huge building, which consisted of a beautiful new Chapel, three dining rooms, large dormitories for the girls, private rooms for the Sisters, large kitchen and laundry, storage rooms, classrooms, recreation facilities, and lots of offices including a medical office. It was a very special day and event for the Sisters as at last they were together as one Community, sharing the spacious and beautiful view of the City of Edmonton and all its scenery.

From those early years when the Sisters used their many talents, in sewing, mending, baking altar breads, and so on, we continued all this and much more along with our work even though big changes were happening all around us.

The 1970s brought about many changes. As there was no longer the need for an orphanage, we decided to open our doors to help struggling families who requested private placements for the children.

Finally, with new Government requirements and regulations, we decided to use some of our empty space to reach out to cancer patients and their families, who were in treatment or waiting for a bed at Cross Cancer Center. Our hearts truly went out to so many souls who were struggling at this time with so much sickness and sadness.

In the early 1980s, we decided to donate the buildings and lands to the Archdiocese of Edmonton because at that time we realized, with the shortage of Sisters and many other factors, that our mission and apostolate was changing. This meant leaving the O'Connell Institute (now Villa Vianney, a residence for our priests), and the original monastery and girls' residence (now the Catholic Pastoral Center).

Archbishop Richard Smith, on May 1, 2007, was installed as the Eighth Archbishop of Edmonton, and the Archdiocese was blessed by his spiritual presence and wisdom. Under his pastoral leadership our community was no longer as active as we once were. Our mission and work had changed and there were so few Sisters left in the city. In that year I transferred to the North American Union of Our Lady of Charity in the States.

In our history over the years we were part of the North American Federation of Our Lady of Charity. Then later on we belonged to The North American Union of our Lady of Charity. This included Mexico, United States, and Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Because of so many different factors such as the distance, finances, administration, and so on, Edmonton then petitioned Rome, to go back to be once again to be a independent Community. As a result of this, four Sisters through the North American Union left for Victoria, British Columbia, to start a community in that Diocese . Two of our Sisters are buried there: Sister Ann Powell (1984) and Sister Michael (Pat) McMahon(1993) . Our stay there was fairly short and Sister Deana Kohlman then moved on to the States and in time served the Sisters as the Superior General of the North American Union for 12 years.

The year 2012 marked our 100-year anniversary of our arrival from Pittsburgh to Edmonton. Our U.S. Province felt it was importance to celebrate and acknowledge our Canadian legacy and history in the Edmonton Archdiocese.

In April 2012, ten of our U.S. Sisters —Sr. Carol Pregno (Provincial), Sisters Deana Kohlman, Sheila Rooney, Yolanda Martinez, Martha P. Escobar, Mary John Franey, Francisca Aguillon, Martha Hernandez, and Norma Johnson — flew to Edmonton to share with Sr. Kathleen Miller, the only remaining Sister still in Edmonton, this grace-filled sacred milestone.

Over the past 100 years, 67 Religious Sisters of Our Lady of Charity have served in the Edmonton Archdiocese. Many of the Sisters have passed on to their Eternal Reward, some have left to follow a different path, and our presence now has become dimmer.

Looking back over these years, we give grateful thanks to God and His Divine Providence for the gift of our work and lives in the Archdiocese. We have reached out and touched the hearts and souls of thousands of young children, teenagers, and women in their time of need. We will be forever present in a different way with the new St. Joseph Seminary and Newman Theological College continuing to bring the message of Compassion, Mercy, Charity, and Zeal for souls, on these sacred grounds. Our blessed founder St. John Eudes guided us through all these past 100 years, and we pray that he will be forever present in the lives and the work of all those who will from now on walk and leave new footprints in the halls and pathways of tomorrow's world.