

Memories of Manitoba
submitted by Sr. Janet Kozak SSMI

In 2014, I celebrated 25 years of consecrated life. It seems like only yesterday, when I first gave my heart to follow Jesus. Though born and raised in Vancouver and area, I had great family ties to Manitoba, since my mother was from Rhodes/Ethelbert and my father was from Roblin. So when I received the news that I was to be missioned to Manitoba, I was quite excited to "come home." It was a shock at first, living in Ontario at that time, but I grew in peace knowing this was yet another call from God, to which I just had to answer "Yes". How could I refuse such an invitation? "To serve where the need is the greatest" is a motto of the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate, which truly motivates me to go beyond myself.

Living in Winnipeg's North-end, for 5 years has been an incredibly rich experience. It certainly was the hub of activity, sharing daily in community life, being close to and involved in our Sisters' missions, Holy Family Home and Immaculate Heart of Mary School. That in itself was profound, but I was also blessed in the apostolate of parish work and in working with the youth and young adults in the Archeparchy of Winnipeg.

I remember when I was a teen and later a young adult, and how I came to know the love of God through my encounters with the same Ukrainian Catholic Sisters I eventually joined. And now as a Sister I had the chance to make a difference, especially with the youth to help them discover, what or whom I had discovered. This led my mission throughout the Eparchy, in the Province of Manitoba. Great events and great friendships make for great memories. The youth really ministered to me; they really touched my heart and soul.

Teaching catechism and mentoring children and youth at our Ukrainian Catholic summer Church Camps holds a very tender place in my heart. And having gone almost every year, for 25 years, I have watched young children become adults and bring their children to the same camps. Going to camp was and still is a sense of "going home" - a place to embrace and love the good, bad, and ugly, in one's self and in the other. We were family. There was no doubt about it; you felt loved and accepted. I did as a Sister, and I know other adults and kids felt that way too. True, camp isn't for everyone, especially having to cope with cold nights, a million mosquitoes, bug spray, ticks and leeches, but we bonded in a special way because we were all in it

together. One special joy for me was sharing these experiences with my SSMI cohort and companion, Sr. Nadia Tkaczuk. Our camp was not five-star resort but it gets five stars for hearts touched by the presence of God in action.

The teen campers, as part of this camp experience at St. Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church Camp, Madge Lake, Saskatchewan, which borders Manitoba, made many excursions into Manitoba, to do a variety of community service projects. The usual project was to go to old rural cemeteries and help prune overgrowth and trim grass. Some projects involved axes and shovels, and sometimes all we had were craft scissors. It's amazing what you can do with just scissors. While we worked we would try to get to know these dearly departed. At the end of the day we prayed for all the souls in our traditional memorial service. It became very memorable and profound when campers would relay in prayer the passing of their loved ones. Sometimes when the projects were large, members of the local rural community joined us to work together. It truly exemplified community - a gathering of the young and old, family and friend, living and deceased.

Another teen project in this area, close to Roblin, Manitoba, was the personal adoption of an old church that was no longer active. This quaint little church, established in 1923, had seen better days and rested hidden among the trees. Though empty of its fineries, selected artifacts were left behind to help keep the story and memories alive of its previous glory. I was aware of this Church because every year I would make a pilgrimage to this place, to visit the past and pray in this quiet place. I wasn't the only one doing so, as was indicated by the guestbook left on the podium for visitors to sign. Some of my own family members were married in that church and they remember as young children being taught catechism by my community of Sisters in the summer months. I needed to share my vision with the teens from camp. So in the summer of 2012, the teens were brought there on a work project to honorably do all they could to clean the church and bell tower, from top to bottom. If necessary, to help the church, "Die with Dignity". The Cemetery would have to wait for the following year. With the help of neighbours and family members of past parishioners (who also believed in the cause), we had a crew of about 30. None will forget that experience. The teens, in fact, claimed this church, Descent of the Holy Ghost, as their own special church, to which they promised to come back

every year. In 2013, we returned once again, to clean and spend more time tackling the trees in the cemetery. The beauty of this experience helped all of us to come in touch with our own heritage - each one's own history. It sparked a greater interest in the locals to keep this Church alive and is now under their care and ownership, to be loved and maintained as a living museum; this history lives on in the lives of each participant.

I have one more story to tell, though I have many. It was 1996, May 2-5, when many of the Ukrainian Catholic Young Adults from across Canada gathered in Winnipeg. This gathering called UNITY was the vision of our Sr. Marie Bielski, SSMI, who saw the need for our Young Adults to unite; to learn about their faith, be empowered by it and celebrate it. Though I was not part of the planning of the event, I did participate in a myriad of ways. On opening night, the Sisters, Clergy and participants were excited to be greeted and blessed by Metropolitan Emeritus, Maxim Hermaniuk - a man well-loved and respected as the first Metropolitan of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Canada. He served on many prominent commissions and councils and worked tirelessly to meet the religious, cultural and social needs of the Ukrainian Catholic community. As he addressed the group riveted to his every word, one could sense that he was moved by the spirit and energy of the young adults present. He encouraged them to be bold leaders and that he had great confidence that the Church was going to be OK in their hands. He expressed his sense of peace entrusting the Church to these young leaders. It was an electrifying commissioning. But it was the next day that had an even greater impact, when the organizers announced to the group, the passing of Metropolitan Maxim, early that morning, May 3rd. He was found peacefully sitting in his chair praying the rosary, when he fell asleep in the Lord. One would like to presume that his last thoughts and prayers were for these young adults whom he just sent forth. The room was silent. Tears sanctified that space and time. No one will ever forget the words, the blessing and his great commission.

I have great memories serving in Manitoba in my home and in my mission, and the intertwining of the two. It's been a privilege and blessing, to be so connected to the past through the present. I pray that Manitoba will always have a place in my future.



Photo of Sr. Janet Kozak, member of the religious congregation, the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate



Sr. Janet Kozak and Sr. Nadia Tkaczuk, with teens at Descent of the Holy Ghost Church – in front of bell tower, July 2013, RM of Hillsburg, MB



Sr. Janet Kozak with teens after completing the Church project – July 2012 – in the Church known to the locals by its location as either Shell River, Postup or Merridale Church, in the Rural Municipality of Hillsburg.