

**Celebrating the Religious Women of Manitoba.
Testimonial by Raymond Lafond**

Dear Archbishops, Sisters and Brothers, dear friends.

I am pleased on this International Women's Day to have the privilege to speak to you to commemorate 49 congregations of religious women who have worked in Manitoba, 25 of which still have members in our province.

There are, of course, fewer today than in the past. This is not due to a lack of interest but rather to aging and declining membership.

If I were to take five to ten minutes to give a brief historical overview of each of these congregations, we would have to turn this into a dinner meeting!

I therefore suggest that each one of us personally go down memory lane and try and recall how religious women have influenced our lives. Hopefully, my personal testimony will jog your memory and assist you in looking at your own individual situation.

For me personally, it predates my birth because my mother entered the novitiate of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary to become a nun. As it turns out, I guess she was rather called to have six children one of whom would spend a good portion of his career working with and for congregations of religious while two others follow in the footsteps of these religious women in health and education.

I was then, like many of you here, born in St. Boniface General Hospital owned and operated by the Grey Nuns of Manitoba.

As a very young boy, my mother's aunt became the provincial superior of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary and I remember how being the Provincial Superior carried a few privileges such as visiting her relatives more often and then, more than ever before, with the very deep pockets of her habit full of candies and small toys for us. Yes for the younger ones present here today all the sisters then wore the long formal habit.

For Grades 1-6, I attended a one-room school known as Youville school, named of course after St. Marguerite d'Youville. In Grade 7, my home room teacher, who is certainly here today and who by the way looks younger than me, was Sr. Louise Henriette now known by her Baptism name of Sr. Berthe Valcourt.

I spent four years at the Junior Seminary of St. Boniface with Father Sulpicien, who was the superior. And of course, like many others, I was a student at Collège de Saint-Boniface under the direction of the Jesuit Fathers for eight years. I won't say anything more about these religious men, given that they are not the focus of today's festivities on this International Women's Day.

After I got my degree as a chartered accountant, Roland Couture invited me to work with him as an advisor for the Oblate Missionaries of St. Boniface, which I have done ever since, for more than 40 years now. My dear wife Madeleine will soon be retiring after many years working at the St. Boniface Oblate Missionaries' counseling centre, better known as the Aulneau Renewal Centre.

I then had the opportunity to serve as general manager of the St. Boniface Caisse Populaire. Naturally, I wanted to handle the accounts of the Grey Nuns of Manitoba. I felt that the best strategy would be to convince the Grey Nuns to agree to have one of their members run for election on the Caisse Board of Directors. Sr. Lucille Damphousse was elected and is no doubt here among us today. In a happy twist of fate, the Grey Nuns who asked me to work for them in 1993.

As a result of the generosity of the Grey Nuns, who paid my salary, I was able to serve as an advisor on several committees of religious congregations in Manitoba, including the Daughters of the Cross, the Benedictine Sisters, the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions and even the congregation of men that has a special place in my heart, the Oblate Fathers. I am currently Board chair of the Corporation of the Sisters of the Saviour (*Corporation des Soeurs du Saveur*) where, as an employee of Forest Guenette, I also audited their financial statements over 40 years ago.

Lastly, as the executive director of a new corporation created by a dozen religious orders to serve the religious congregations of Canada, I had the opportunity to work or provide advisory services to some 20 religious orders outside Manitoba.

Like me when I started writing this presentation, you will surely over the next few days think of additional times or events when religious crossed the various pathways of our lives.

Having just reflected on the impact of these religious women on our personal lives, let us now reflect on the impact these religious women have had on the communities where we have lived throughout Manitoba. It would be great if we had time for all of you to share testimonies of your own on how your communities were shaped by many of the religious present within these communities.

While religious men have left their mark on Manitoba – the Jesuit Fathers, the Clerics of Saint Viator, or the Oblate Fathers, for example – it was the religious women, who were much greater in number, who left their mark in nearly all of the cities and towns of Manitoba in terms of education and healthcare services, social services, counseling services, pastoral care, or as volunteers in countless charitable works established to help the less fortunate among us. This of course applies to my hometown of St. Jean Baptiste with the SNJM (Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary). However, it is also the case with the various orders of nuns present in many more remote towns and villages in northern, southern, eastern and western Manitoba. The convents that typically housed the village school and sometimes the hospital were and still

are the largest or second-largest buildings in the place.

Remember that government services were practically non-existent during the first 100+ years of our province, which only began to fund most of the education and healthcare services some 50 years ago when the population of Manitoba was already at three-quarters of what it is today.

Simply put, the citizens of the province of Manitoba would not have been able to thrive as they have done without the contribution of “our” religious women. I say “our” because they were such an integral part of our communities. What’s more, the vast majority of these nuns were Manitoban. This is the case for nearly all of the orders of nuns who still have members in the province. For example, there are well over 100 Grey Nuns in Manitoba and Alberta, with the major difference being that, while more than 80% of the Grey Nuns of Manitoba were Manitoba-born, more than 80% of the Grey Nuns of Alberta were not from that province.

These religious women were persons of faith who dedicated their whole lives to serve wherever they were most needed. They were among the very first white persons to come to Manitoba to educate the young boys and girls of aboriginal or white descent and soon after to offer health and other social services.

When I was a trustee of the St. Boniface Cathedral in the 80s, we complained about having only one priest plus sometimes an older retired priest to assist in such a large parish. Yes we complained about the lack of human resources when there were more than 300 religious women within one kilometer or two of the cathedral. We acted from a mindset of "lack" rather than a mindset of "abundance". Hopefully, my Church will in the future consider to the fullest extent all its human resources.

Unfortunately, when religious women collaborated with the assimilation policies of our federal government forcing children of First Nations, without the consent of their parents, to attend schools away from their families and communities, it was not a success, at least for many. I did however witness several of these residential school students profusely thank Sisters for the education received enabling them to fully contribute and partake in the Canadian society while flourishing in their own culture. Yet we must not forget that these religious women had nothing but success for many decades before the formulation and imposition by force of these assimilation policies. Finally, how unthinkable it would have been for our congregations of religious women to refuse to serve the people of our First Nations, when their mission was to serve others in need regardless of race or color.

The challenge for us here as laypersons, in my humble opinion, is to assist these religious women bridge the perceived gap or separation between people of First Nations and the rest of us who came originally mostly from Europe and more recently from all over the world. If only we could all listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit rather than the voice of the Ego we would soon realize that in our Essence, we are all the same, because as extensions or creations of God's Mind, we are in our Essence pure Thought and pure Love. If only we could stop judging one

another and forgive one another without exception, we would see this Essence, the Christ in every one of our brothers and sisters enabling oneself thereafter to see this Essence or Christ within.

For all congregations of religious women, the discernment they would always do before determining if they were called or not to serve in a certain ministry was always altruistic. They reflected on whether or not this was where the greatest need lay or if it would be to the best interest of the most vulnerable in society. One of the things that has moved me most was to see a Sister at a fundraising ball who could, excuse the pun, have a ball and yes even dance with the big shots in the place. Then the next day, walking with that same Sister from her residence to her place of over 1 km away, I noticed how this same sister was even better known and loved by the homeless on the street with whom she appeared to be even more at ease.

Lastly, given that I wanted to bear witness to the courage of these sisters whom we all recognize as pioneers in education, healthcare and many other social and community services over many years, it is also important to underscore the administrative skills and talents of these religious women of Manitoba. While they were the first to provide healthcare, education, social and community services that are among the best in Manitoba, they also wanted to ensure the sustainability of these services. They were not afraid to trust laypeople and to devolve governance of all of their healthcare, education and social and community services to them, despite the continued hesitation of our institutional church, and for that I say, well done!

The brief trip down memory lane that I asked each of you to make on an individual basis and within your communities has no doubt shown you how each of us and each of our communities has been shaped by the steadfast commitment of these many religious women over the past 175 years.

Our church is and will continue to be much poorer without the presence and contribution of these religious women, whose numbers are ever-declining. Will we as laypersons be up to meeting the challenge? Our religious women have always put their faith in providence, unwaveringly answering the call with a resounding "YES."

Once again, my heartfelt congratulations and thanks to these women of faith and courage who sought to know God by serving their fellow brothers and sisters.