

PATRICIA GENDREAU'S TESTIMONIAL

My dear sisters and friends in faith,

Where would I be *in my life* had it not been for the sisters? Where would we be without the nuns' contribution to our community?

Clothed in a light veil and mantle, with a long pleated skirt and a silver cross around their necks, these women of God with deep roots in and commitment to the Manitoba community began working in the Red River Colony back in the mid-19th century. These French-Canadian, Anglophone, Ukrainian and Catholic nuns offered and continue to offer a range of essential services in healthcare, education, religious education and pastoral care, *building* convents, public and boarding schools, hospitals, sanitariums, orphanages, homes for the elderly, and shelters for women at risk.

By founding and running such establishments, these nuns provided the community with an invaluable service, creating a structure, discipline, training, governance and a welcoming place for societies forgotten. Through their steadfast beliefs and tireless service, they enhanced the quality of life for God's people and were a shining example of putting His commandment to love one another into practice. Typically, in the mid-19th century, a young woman was destined either to be a wife and mother or a spinster. However, these religious congregations offered them a third option: to serve our Lord with the possibility of receiving a post-secondary education and professional training.

As the 20th century marched on, the nuns' apostolic life had to adapt to an ever-changing society and meet the contemporary challenges they encountered in their missions. There was progress not only in the healthcare and education fields but also in foreign missions, helping the less fortunate, liturgy, services to complement those of the clergy, archival development, assistance to newcomers and even involvement in legal organizations.

From the time I started school in 1956 until the end of Grade 12, the bulk of my education came from the Sisters of St. Joseph-de-Saint-Hyacinthe in Lorette, and the Grey Nuns of Manitoba in Ste. Anne.

During those years, I saw these courageous, spiritual and devoted women provide quality teaching to the children in Manitoba's rural areas. In their day-to-day life, they were a Christian model of religious living and French-Canadian culture. They taught me that it was important to seek excellence in everything I did, not to shy away from living in French, and to be proud of my language and culture. Their aim was to promote higher education and the belief that women are intelligent, strong and capable of standing on their own two feet and having a career.

By the time I was 18, thanks to a year spent as a boarder at the Grey Nuns convent in Ste. Anne and the 11 years leading up to it, I, like many young people who received their education from the nuns, had my own personal toolkit for living, including the importance of respect and justice and of always being of service, of living *God's unconditional love*, the belief that I was worth something, and the desire to continue my post-secondary education. I decided to embark on a teaching career.

In addition to these two religious communities, I have also had the opportunity to get to know and work with cousins and friends at the Sisters of the Saints-Noms-de-Jésus-et-de-Marie and the Daughters of the Cross. Like the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Grey Nuns, these religious orders also showed a tremendous devotion to their fellow citizens in the community. They always did their very best for the greater glory of God, exercising their stewardship to the fullest degree.

It is now time for you and me to pick up the torch and continue the legacy of these traditions through the giving back of our talents, time and treasures to our communities.

Through your exemplary lives of joy, simplicity, humility and service, you, dear sisters, have created an invaluable legacy that will go on forever. You have made a difference for us, for future generations of Manitobans, and for the province's French-speaking Christian community. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks and I congratulate you for all of these prolific contributions as *women and true disciples of God*.

Patricia Gendreau