

Today January 27th on the feast day of St. Angela Merici, foundress of the Ursuline order in 1535 in Brescia, Italy, I am happy to write down my testimonial on behalf of the Sisters who were part of the lives of four generations of my family. They arrived, only four of them, in our pioneer village in 1914. In 1945 I started school with the sisters as my teachers. My mother began in 1924, my eldest daughter in 1963 and my eldest granddaughter in 1987. As a child their traditional garments demanded respect. After Vatican II their familiar dress was modernized and many sisters resumed their baptismal names. I can't recall when the sisters habits changed for the 3rd and last time. Their veils were put away and they all wore ordinary clothes. Our generation noticed the change as well when St. Andrew became Sr. Joan, Sr. Paul was now Sr. Lillian, Sr. Benedict became Sr. Maria and Sr. Carole was now Sr. Madeleine. These were big changes for our small community. Through the years they were teachers, hospital chaplains, educators, catechists, sacristans, church trustees, and pastoral care workers. They instilled spiritual values of body and mind by giving us an appreciation for music, art, singing, dance and music. In a rural area of Manitoba, that was of utmost importance.

During the 1960s they spread out to the surrounding towns of Swan Lake (1960-88), Mariapolis, Notre Dames de Lourdes, St. Norbert, St. Boniface Diocesan High School, Glenboro and Dunrea. In 1947 their superior Mother Angela welcomed the opportunity of opening a home in the newly formed parish of Our Lady of Victory Memorial on Arnold Avenue in Winnipeg. The school they started 100 years ago is still in operation. Currently it is only an elementary school but it was considered an excellent high school for 30 years. In their quiet way, these Catholic women gave up so much to serve God and their community. My own children remember the motherly way they wrapped them up warm with scarves sometimes too tight on a cold winter day waiting by the door for the school bus to bring them home. One sister was good at extracting baby teeth when they became loose. It was all in a days work. They demanded excellence; we were expected to do nothing but our best. These sisters persevered through difficult times - 3 convents burned to the ground during the 100 years. Though they left us 25 years ago their presence and influence is still very noticeable in our midst. Throughout the years their dedication remained to their vows and they were an example to the whole community. We are left with good values to live our lives by and many good memories.

During the busiest times, there were about 30 sisters in our congregation. Now they are only seven sisters left living out their retirement in St. Boniface. They all come back to where it all started at the end of their days on earth here in Bruxelles at the Roman Catholic cemetery. To those gone before us, rest in peace after a job well done! Thank you once again.

A footnote: I mentioned my mother Helene Van Deynze (b. 1912), my daughter Lucinda Carels, my granddaughter Vanessa Rigaux is now 32 and the mother of 3 little boys - so the sisters' influence goes on.

Yvonne Jonk-Willemen