

Dear Rolande,

I am delighted to tell you a bit about my life since. I am the eldest of 17 children: 11 girls and 6 boys, 16 of whom are still living. I give thanks to God for the gift of life and for my large family. My parents' faith was simple but deep. I believe that the call from the Lord to religious life dates back to when I was four years old. I had an aunt with the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary who inspired me through her love of children. Her love inspired me to become like her.

At school, catechism was my favorite subject. At Taché School, in Grade 4, Rita Valcourt exposed me to the idea of mission work through her teaching and testimonials. When I was 11, I went to the St. Norbert boarding school where the nuns had a great impression on me. I studied there until Grade 12 and learned music. As I was drawn to the poor and often walked with people who had no friends, I dreamt of becoming like the Sisters who had serving the poor at heart. At the age of 19, I entered the St. Boniface novitiate with the Grey Nuns. Those three years were a long test of faith. While my religious life was marked by the law and fear, the experience strengthened my faith in Jesus.

It was a joy to take my vows on August 15, 1958. My first mission was at the Ste. Marguerite residential school in Fort Frances, followed by a school in Lebrét to teach young boys, and then to St. Michael, North Dakota as the Grade 5 teacher. In September 1964, I left for Berens River where I taught for five years in highly challenging environments due to the school shift from federal to provincial.

In 1970, I embarked on a journey to join other sisters in São Paulo, Brazil starting with 4 months of acculturation in Petropolis. I was then transferred to Maranhão. After serving as principal at the school for a year, I went on to oversee the basic community education. It was a marvelous adventure, and seeing people take charge of their lives and feel God's love was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life; see poor people succeed at taking matters into their own hands, all while knowing they are loved by God.

Back in Canada in 1973, I went on to study for 3 years at the Dominican College in Ottawa, where I received my bachelor's degree in theology. When I graduated, I was asked to go to Fort Frances to take part in a pastoral ministry with the Aboriginal community. That was my new Brazil. I taught catechism at the Mine Centre School and after class, I would go either to Seine River or Red Gut Reserve to visit, prepare the baptisms and pray with the people.

From 1984 to 1987, I remained at the Provincial House to take care of the liturgy. In 1987, Sister Yvonne Bouchard and I went to open a mission in God's Lake Narrows in northern Manitoba, to minister to the poor on the reserve. It was like going back 50 years. Once a month, for a week, we would take turns going to God's River to do pastoral work. I then went to Rankin Inlet for 1.5 years and then back to the Provincial House in St. Boniface. I was responsible for liturgy and teaching newcomers at the Little White Flower school.

In 1998, I felt the call, along with Sisters Mariette Ste Croix, Idalina Ferreira, and Rita Fifi, to go and live among the poor on Langside Street. For 8 years we welcomed several women in need who stayed with us for quite a long time. During that time period, I also got involved in several neighbourhood organizations for social justice, where I felt God's presence at work. I enjoyed working with the poor, sharing their suffering, challenges and joy.

After a refreshing sabbatical year, I began teaching English to refugees, working at the Agape Table community nutrition centre, and helping with the communion to the sick. In July, 2011, I retired and moved to Despains Residence. The Lord has been my rock and support throughout my life. His Spirit has guided me. Following the example of Marguerite d'Youville, I delight in the Love with which the Provident Father has surrounded me during my life, and I thank God for the opportunity to serve Him through the poor and the destitute.

Rolande Bissonnette