



NEWS ARCHIVE:

Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon

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Humboldt parish honours Sisters of Saint Elizabeth, 100 years after religious order arrived in area to provide health care

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

A century of caring and compassion was celebrated with joy and thanksgiving May 15 as the St. Augustine parish community in Humboldt honoured the Franciscan Sisters of Saint Elizabeth for 100 years of service in the community and beyond.

The centennial celebration in Humboldt began with celebration of the Eucharist with Abbot Peter Novecosky of St. Peter's Abbey in Muenster, Bishop Bryan Bayda of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Saskatoon, St. Augustine pastor Rev. Emile April, and a number of priests, including a visiting Franciscan friar from Europe.

Also in attendance were 16 Sisters of Saint Elizabeth from Germany, Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, who were part of a European delegation that traveled to Canada to

celebrate with the Saskatchewan community. The Franciscan order was established in Aachen, Germany in 1662 to care for the sick.

Alumni of the St. Elizabeth Hospital (SEH) School of Nursing attended the 100th anniversary celebration wearing their nursing caps and capes,

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participating in an honour guard, along with members of the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic Women's League and the St. Elizabeth's Hospital Auxiliary. Representatives of other religious orders from across the province were also among the special guests at the celebration.

SEH Nursing School graduate Magdalen Dagenais presented a brief history of the order and introduced symbolic items carried forward during the opening procession: a picture of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, the order's patron; as well as bread and roses, a reminder of a miracle associated with the saintly queen, who cared for the poor and suffering in spite of her husband's objections. Dagenais related how St. Elizabeth was carrying bread to feed a poor woman at the door, when her husband the king stopped her and demanded to see what she was carrying – when she opened the basket, it was filled with roses, in spite of it being the dead of winter. Chastened, her husband apologized and began to support her outreach to the poor.

In his homily, Abbot Peter Novecosky noted that it was both Good Shepherd Sunday and the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, as well as the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth to the area. "We might well recall the image of the Good Shepherd to consider what brought the Sisters of St Elizabeth to St. Peter's Colony in 1911, one hundred years ago, when this area looked much, much different," Novecosky said.

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“Abbot Bruno (Doerfler) saw that the new colony, founded in 1903, was growing as new settlers arrived. There was a need for a hospital and nurses to take care of the sick and dying and to help mothers give birth,” he related.



“Meanwhile a convent of Elizabethan sisters in Austria was being blessed by vocations. At their 200th anniversary in 1910, they decided to celebrate their good fortune by founding a community in Canada.”

The first three sisters stepped off the train at Muenster on May 14, 1911, facing pioneer hardships and a strange, new land. But within 18 months, a hospital and convent was built in Humboldt, and the religious order began to grow.

“God did bless the Elizabethan sisters here with many vocations, and their field of service expanded far beyond their hospital at Humboldt,” said Novecosky, pointing to the historical display set up at the local museum and publication of a history of the sisters, entitled “And the Prairie Shall Flourish” written by Joan Eyolfson Cadham working with a local committee.



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Over the years, the Sisters of St. Elizabeth established hospitals and nursing homes around the province, and engaged in other work – such as teaching, housekeeping and pastoral care – across western Canada. Members of the order also served among the Saskatchewan missionaries in Brazil. Today, most members of the community have retired from active service.

At a banquet following the Mass, master of ceremonies Nestor Trach reiterated the history of the local order, quoting from a history published in 1961 for the golden jubilee. He described the arrival of Sisters Augustina Platzer, Philomena Juch and Gabriela Lex in 1911 “fired up with the zeal of St. Elizabeth for the care of the sick, strong with the strength of her spirit. They were going to labour among the pioneers in Canada, helping to bring nursing here, which was so lacking in those days.”

Trach expressed thanks to the sisters for their years of caring and compassion, and the crowd responded with a standing ovation for the sisters.

Bishop Bryan Bayda of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy brought greetings on behalf of the bishops of Saskatchewan, expressing gratitude for the “role played in the past 100 years in bringing that presence of Christ to this part of Saskatchewan and beyond.” Abbot Peter Novecosky spoke on behalf of



the Abbey, recalling the many years the sisters served at St. Peter’s College, putting food on the table and washing clothes.

Fr. Emile April expressed appreciation on behalf of the parish, and remembered in particular the members of the order who have died. “May Lord grant eternal reward to all the Elizabethan sisters who have returned to him after many years of dedicated service in his vineyard, and many graces to all of you who carry the torch of loving care today and into the future,” he said.

SEH Nursing School graduate Rosemary Possberg spoke on behalf of the Catholic Women’s League, and Tom Kiefer on behalf of Parish Pastoral Council. “We congratulate you, we thank you and we love you,” he said.

In bringing greetings from the local Knights of Columbus council, Dennis Korte recalled how the Knights walked alongside the sisters through the past century. “Our faith teaches us to be gifts to each other, and you have been the very best of gifts. You came bringing gifts of caring, compassion, faith, love and mercy,” Korte said.

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Recalling his own pioneering great-grandparents, Korte reflected on what joy the homesteaders must have felt at the arrival of the sisters in the area. "They surely were overwhelmed with joy at hearing the news of your coming. Imagine: Catholic sisters in a Catholic hospital. Imagine the joy and prayerful thanks of those pioneers. With grateful hearts we thank you for your 100 years of witness among us."

Thelma Shedlowsky (*right*) spoke on behalf of the nurses' alumni of St. Elizabeth Nursing School, thanking the sisters for their many years of training nurses and caring for the sick.

"I'm very proud to be a St. Elizabeth's Hospital School of Nursing graduate," she said to applause. "We received training that taught us to be compassionate, it taught us how to use common sense, and also to be economical." She also recalled with affection the fun and support graduates have experienced through the years.

"I wonder if the sisters who arrived here 100 years ago could have envisioned all the good that has been done. When you think about training 472 nurses: we saved many lives, there were many, many babies born," she said, adding that the Sisters of Saint Elizabeth were innovative and worked hard to introduce advances in health care technology and to try new ways of providing better care.

With St. Elizabeth's Hospital now closed, and replaced with a publicly-run regional health centre, the old building is standing vacant, waiting for demolition. Schedlowsky related how during a recent walk through the empty building she was struck by all the messages written on the wall by visitors, former patients and staff.



"I was just amazed. A little five year old child wrote 'thanks.' An 88-year-old man wrote 'I've seen my mother die in this hospital and my children were born in this hospital, I am one of the last patients who was in this hospital,'" she said, describing message after message about what a wonderful place it was to receive care and to work.

"The Sisters of St Elizabeth have been such an important part of our community. I hope we have all been aware of that," she said. "Thank you sisters, you've opened up many doors for all of us."

Alice Germann spoke on behalf of St Elizabeth Hospital Auxiliary, noting the hardships that the Sisters of St. Elizabeth experienced over the years.

"From the beginning the mission must have seemed impossible or a cruel test of their faith,' she said, describing hunger, a lack of equipment and supplies, no electricity. Often the sisters had to go door to door, asking for help and donations, and in addition to caring for the sick, they tended livestock and gardens, baked, preserved, cooked, and cleaned.

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“They reassured the apprehensive and fearful, encouraged and coached the recovering, prepared and comforted the dying and consoled the bereaved. They held themselves to the highest Christian values of dignity and respect for all life, from the yet unborn to those at the end of their earthly journey,” she said.

“Through the years, the sisters endured the trials brought by war, rationing, flu epidemics, polio crisis, and the Great Depression of the dirty thirties. These were tough times that broke many people’s bodies and spirits. Through it all the sisters persevered, making do, often going without themselves.”

From the beginning, individuals, businesses and groups offered their help to the sisters, related Germann, describing the work of the Hospital Auxiliary, which had many name changes over the past century. She provided details about a wide range of projects, raffles, initiatives, fund-raisers and events organized by the group, always with the prayers, support and appreciation of the sisters.

“We say with all our heart: thank you, thank you, thank you, and may God bless you and keep you dear Sisters of St. Elizabeth for ever,” said Germann.

Sr. Philomena Dobmeier, OSE, (*right*) responded to the tributes, speaking on behalf of her religious community. Thanking all those involved in the celebration, she said it was truly a day for rejoicing, and she expressed appreciation to the founding sisters, to the superior of the convent in Austria who first initiated the order’s move to Canada, and “all the sisters who have gone before us. A special, special thank you to all my sisters still with us: Worry not, our legacy of caring will continue.”

Dobmeier also thanked the visitors who came for the celebration – including 16 members of the order from Europe whose visit has been a great blessing.



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“It’s been overwhelming, to once again have the halls of our convent filled with energetic life, they’re all very young and they are energetic and there is a lot of laughter,” she said, describing the celebration the sisters had together the day before on the very date of the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the sisters in Muenster. “We had the most beautiful day yesterday, we had our own celebration in the convent – and the bishop came to celebrate Mass with us which was also a highlight.”

She thanked all those who presented greetings and messages, as well as expressing appreciation to the planning committee led by Frieda Baur, and the committee that worked on the order’s history book.

“What a privilege and honor it has been for us to serve you in Humboldt Saskatchewan,” she said. “I am sure the sisters looking at the past – it has been sometimes a very trying experience, but also been a lot of adventure, a lot of laughter.”

The many kinds words have been overwhelming, Dobmeier added. “It is praise I think some of the other sisters should have had, but we’re the ones here now celebrating the one hundredth, we’re the privileged ones, we are experiencing what they didn’t get to experience at the time.”

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Book Launch –

A book about the 100-year history of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth in Saskatchewan and beyond was recently produced by a committee that included (left to right) Donald Telfer, author Joan Eyolfson Cadham, Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers and Ivan Buehler. The book was officially launched May 17, 2011 at the Humboldt Museum, which featured a display about the religious order marking the 100th anniversary of the order’s arrival in St. Peter’s Colony.