



The *Great* Canadian
Catholic Hospital History Project

Documenting the legacy and contribution of the
Congregations of Religious Women in Canada,
their mission in health care, and the founding and operation of Catholic hospitals.



Projet de la *Grande* Histoire
des hôpitaux catholiques au Canada

Retracer l'héritage et la contribution des
congrégations de religieuses au Canada,
leur mission en matière de soins de santé ainsi que la fondation et l'exploitation des hôpitaux catholiques.

75 Years of Caring

Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the foundation in
Canada of the Franciscan Sisters of St. Elizabeth
and the founding of St. Elizabeth's Hospital
Humboldt, Saskatchewan
1911-1986

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75 years of Caring

1911 - 1986



1912



1928



1968

History of the Franciscan Sisters of St. Elizabeth

Commemorating the 75th Anniversary
of the Foundation in Canada
of the Franciscan Sisters of St. Elizabeth
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1911 - 1986

By Joan Baron, OSE

Where does one begin to tell the story of the evolution of a group of women who have served God in their neighbor for 75 years?

As we review the history of our community and reminisce, the question that comes is: What has been the common thrust that has kept the momentum of the spirit going to this day?

A phrase taken from our recently formulated identity and mission statement speaks in some part to this question — “We identify in our world the poor, sick and needy who most require our services, and leaving what is familiar when we must, we take risks in serving in new ways.”

This statement serves as a bridge from the past to the future. It is as old as our first beginnings and as new as the call of the church into the 21st century.

Beginnings

There were certainly risks taken in establishing our Canadian foundation in 1911. Our immediate roots originate in Klagenfurt, Austria, where a foundation of Sisters of St. Elizabeth of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis of Assisi had carried on the traditional work of caring for the sick.

In 1910, on the occasion of the bicentenary of their foundation, Mother Pulcheria Wilhelm, the superior general at the time, wished to establish a foundation in America as a perpetual commemoration of their jubilee. Through the instrumentality of Father Alexander Berghold, who had spent 40 years in America doing pastoral work, Mother Pulcheria Wilhelm was put in contact with Abbot Bruno Doerfler of Muenster, Sask., prior of the Benedictines.



The Sisters of St. Elizabeth were founded in Aachen, Germany, in 1622. They began a foundation in Klagenfurt, Austria in 1710, and from there came to Canada two centuries later. Above: the motherhouse at Aachen. During the Second World War the Sisters were forced to flee, and the Nazi SS took over the complex for their own operations. After the war the Sisters reclaimed the building.



Mother Pulcheria Wilhelm, foundress of the Canadian foundation of the Franciscan Sisters of St. Elizabeth, Humboldt, Sask., and first canonical superior general.

The negotiations prior to the sisters' actual arrival in Muenster involved many disappointments and setbacks. The Franciscan Sisters of St. Elizabeth in Klagenfurt were under the authority of the local bishop and lived in strict enclosure. Permission to establish a foundation was required from the local bishop and from Rome.

The Bishop of Klagenfurt had many reservations, particularly financial, with regard to the project and was reluctant to grant permission. A fatal crash of the financial institution operated by the clergy of the diocese occurred during the time of these negotiations. The sisters of Klagenfurt had their capital invested with this institution and therefore suffered a tremendous financial loss.

In the midst of these distressing circumstances, Mother Pulcheria Wilhelm maintained her determination to see her dream fulfilled — nothing could dampen her energetic and enterprising spirit.

In a letter to Abbot Bruno in September 1910 she wrote: "Should we risk to undertake the project with the present means or should we wait? This under-

taking has caused us much suffering already, more particularly myself, but also the convent. I have however, always thought that a cause usually becomes anchored during a storm and if it be God's will it will move again. Personally, I have not changed my mind as to the undertaking." These words convey the spirit of our Canadian founder.

Mother Pulcheria was a woman of great faith; recourse to prayer was always her remedy in times of trial. It was this spirit along with the traditions of her ancestors that she wished to implant into the Canadian foundation.

The beginning of the fulfilment of her dream occurred when three Sisters, Augustina Platzer, Philomena Jug and Gabriela Lex, left the Motherhouse in Klagenfurt, Austria, on April 30, 1911, accompanied by Father George Trunk, to begin the long journey to the unknown land — Canada.

The sisters travelled by steamship, embarking at Bremen and arriving in New York. Their overland trip from New York to Muenster was by train. When the travel-weary missionaries arrived at Muenster May 14, 1911, no one was there to meet them. The telegram announcing their arrival had been delayed.

Tired, not having had the services of a sleeping car all the way from New York, they began to drag their suitcases from the station to the monastery of the Benedictine Fathers. They were greeted by the awaiting community and offered rainwater to freshen up after their long trip. As they stared at the dark brown water, they put on a good front and thought to themselves that they ought to conform to the customs of the land.

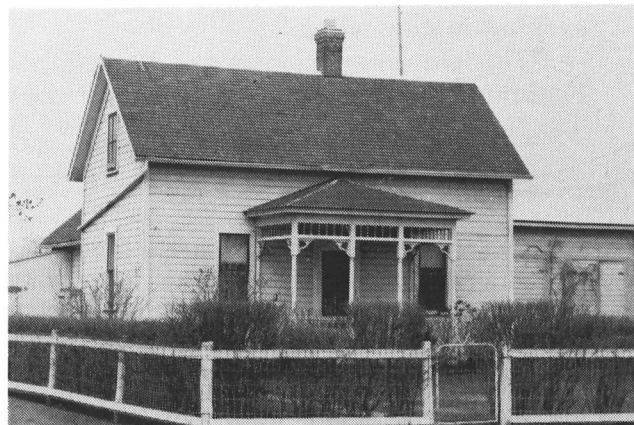
That night, they were even to be denied a well deserved night's rest — some uninvited nocturnal visitors (bedbugs) caused them to spend the night out of bed.



The first three sisters who came to Muenster, Sask. from Klagenfurt, Austria, May 14, 1911. Sisters Gabriela Lex, Philomena Jug and Augustina Platzer, accompanied by Fr. George Trunk.

Abbot Bruno and the people of district had been anxiously awaiting the arrival of the sisters. The day after their arrival, they were whisked off to meet the mayor of Humboldt, O.W. Andersen, to begin negotiations for building the hospital. Later that week they were taken to Prince Albert to meet Bishop Albert Pascal, OMI.

By the time the plans for the hospital were completed and approved by the government, the summer had passed — but the sisters were not idle.



Dr. Barry's house, where the Sisters first nursed while awaiting the completion of the hospital.

The local doctors, Dr. Barry in particular, wanted the sisters to begin taking care of the patients immediately. He had set up his new house as a small temporary hospital and wanted the sisters as nurses. Both the mayor of Humboldt and Abbot Bruno tried to dissuade the sisters from accepting this assignment for fear that some failure would occur and hurt the sisters' reputation before the hospital was established.

But Dr. Barry's persistence won out. Gradually the sisters did become involved in working in his hospital, assisting with operations, caring for the patients 24 hours a day and doing private-duty nursing in the homes.

The sisters were concerned about becoming qualified as practising nurses in Canada. Qualification was a government policy for anyone caring for the sick in a hospital. It was also a prerequisite for a government grant of fifty cents per patient per day for the hospital — something that meant a great deal to them as they had no financial resources.

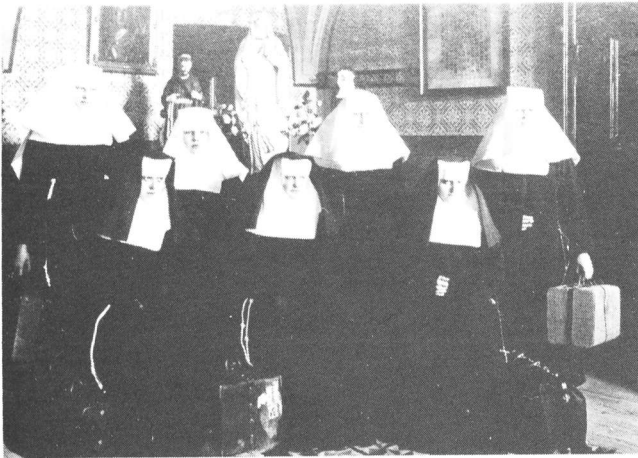
It was necessary for the sisters to know English in order to take the qualifying exam. To obtain the necessary nurse's training and to learn English, Sisters Philomena and Gabriella were sent to Duluth, Minn., that fall.

Sister Augustine remained behind to supervise the construction of the hospital. She continued to nurse and went on begging tours throughout the colony collecting alms for the building project. Being left behind, alone in a strange land, only increased the homesickness and longing for community life

which she had been accustomed to for so many years.

Winter came early that first year and the construction of the hospital had to be halted at the beginning of November.

Due to the financial losses of the motherhouse in Klagenfurt, no financial assistance could be given to assist in the establishment of the hospital at Humboldt. The community in Austria, however, was generous in sending personnel. In the spring of 1912, Abbot Bruno travelled to Europe and upon returning brought with him seven sisters from Klagenfurt: Sisters Euphrasia Weiss, Salesia Scheriou, Clementina Possenig, Helena Karnicer, Xaveria Motchilig, Agatha Loibnegger and a novice, Gertrude Bergles.



In the spring of 1912, Abbot Bruno returning from Europe brought with him seven sisters: Sisters Euphrasia Weiss, Salesia Scheriou, Clementina Possenig, Helena Karnicer, Xaveria Motchilig, Agatha Loibnegger and a novice, Gertrude Bergles.

It was a joyous occasion to welcome their sisters from Klagenfurt, and to receive news from home and gifts from the motherhouse.

But the arrival of new members caused problems in living accommodations. Some sisters went to live temporarily in a house near the hospital. They



A view of the St. Peter's Abbey complex before the arrival of the Sisters.

were so crowded for space that their beds had to be placed side by side and they had to climb into bed over the bottom end.



The first convent of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth at Muenster, Sask.

Food too was scarce — the sisters depended on Divine Providence for their daily fare. They had a stove, a primitive table and two rough-hewn chairs which Sister Augustine had inherited as a payment for her nursing.

Some sisters remained at Muenster and took over the monastery kitchen and laundry upon the request of Abbot Bruno.



First St. Elizabeth Hospital blessed by Bishop Pascal, OMI, on Oct. 3, 1912.

Oct. 3, 1912, was a day of rejoicing. Bishop Pascal, OMI, Bishop of Prince Albert, presided over the blessing of the new hospital. For the sisters it meant that after a year and a half they finally had a home of their own. They could begin to live a regular religious life and practise their calling as nurses.

Even though the hospital was blessed, work on the inside was not completed. In spite of this the doctor arrived and asked to admit a patient. The sisters could not refuse, so they began caring for the patient in the situation as best they could. The patients continued to come; by December, 1913, 281 patients had been cared for, 128 of whom required surgery.

Because of shortage of staff, the sisters were required to work long hours. Even though none of them had Canadian government diplomas, they alone did all the nursing in the hospital. Sister Philomena had learned a great deal in Duluth and Sister Salesia and Clementina had completed their courses in Klagenfurt.

The year 1913 was significant for the young community. The term of office of Mother Pulcheria expired at Klagenfurt; now she was free and able to devote herself to the new foundation. She left her cloister and homeland with two other sisters, Seraphina Pfurtscheller and Walburga Swetlin, to come to Canada. At last the foundress had arrived.



Mother Pulcheria Wilhelm, foundress of the Canadian Foundation came to Canada in 1913. Accompanied by Sister Walburga Swetlin and novice Seraphina Pfurtscheller.

Later that same year, Aug. 30, the Canadian foundation was declared independent of the mother-house in Klagenfurt and Mother Pulcheria Wilhelm was canonically elected as first superior general.

During these first years young women from the district began to join the small community. The first Canadian to join was Agnes Schmidt of Humboldt, Sister Marianna. Among the other Canadian pioneers were Sisters Elizabeth Lopinski, Benedicta Yungwirth, Theodora Sieben, Aloisia Heisler, Hyacintha Senger and Pulcheria Poth.

Even though the Canadian foundation was very dear to her, Mother Pulcheria could not completely accustom herself to the pioneer life of this country. Her health began to fail two years after her arrival. Sister Augustine Platzer was also ill. Her energies



Agnes Schmidt of Humboldt, Sister Marianna, first Canadian to join the Sisters of St. Elizabeth.

had been drained as a result of the strenuous efforts, hardships and privations of that first year.

The fledgling community was struck a hard blow in early 1916 when both Sister Augustine Platzer and Mother Pulcheria Wilhelm died within a month.

Although the community suffered from this double loss, they drew their strength from God in prayer and carried on responding to the growing needs of caring for the sick of the district.

Expansion

Because of the prevalence of contagious diseases, an isolation house called St. Rochus Hospital was built, as well as a building to serve as laundry, workshop and novitiate. These expansions proved insufficient and in the next couple of years an extension of 18 beds was added to St. Elizabeth's Hospital.



St. Rochus Hospital, isolation house for contagious diseases.

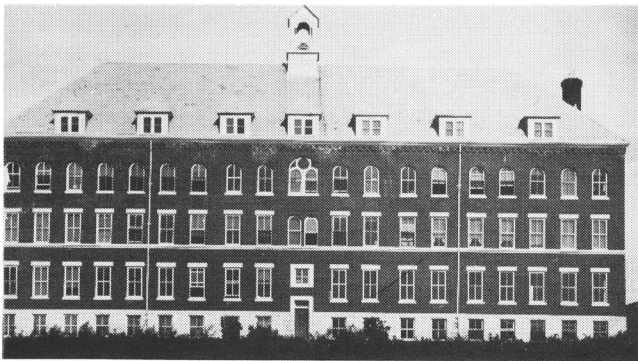
With the expansion of the hospital, the workload also increased. Mother Walburga Swetlin, superior general in 1919, appealed to Klagenfurt to send more sisters. Four sisters and two candidates arrived in 1920, and two years later another six sisters arrived, bringing the total number of sisters from Austria to 27.



Last two groups of Sisters from the Motherhouse in Klagenfurt, Austria, bringing the total number of sisters from Austria to 27.

With the hospital extended and the number of sisters almost doubled, the congregation was able to respond to requests for their services in other places.

The 1920s were punctuated with the establish-



St. Peter's College, Muenster, opened in 1921. Sisters of St. Elizabeth provided the cooking and laundry services. Sisters are still serving here, today.

ment of expanded services and institutions.

St. Peter's College, Muenster, was opened at the Abbey in 1921. The number of sisters employed was increased to nine and they took charge of the cooking and laundry services. Sisters still serve at St. Peter's Abbey and College today.

In 1922 the sisters responded to a request to build a hospital in St. Joseph's Colony, at Macklin, Sask. Here, too, the beginnings were small; a house served as a temporary hospital. The sisters went begging for money until there were sufficient funds to build a hospital in 1927.



St. Joseph's Hospital, Macklin, built in 1927.

St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Humboldt set up a Nurses' Training School in 1923. Dr. H. R. Fleming of Humboldt assisted in this project, which also enabled the early nursing sisters to obtain registration by waiver without exams. Miss Godin was the first director of the School of Nursing. The position was subsequently filled by sisters until its phasing out in 1969.



The Sisters took over a hospital in Scott in 1924.



St. Michael's Hospital, Cudworth, built in 1926.

The sisters took over a hospital in Scott in 1924 and began caring for the sick in temporary rented quarters in Cudworth. They withdrew from the hospital in Scott after eight years, but continued in Cudworth, establishing St. Michael's Hospital which the congregation continues to operate today.

By 1928 the increased number of patients required further expansion of the hospitals in Humboldt and Macklin. Once again finances were a big concern, and a loan was needed. The local church authority reluctantly granted permission. Included in the expansion project for Humboldt was a larger chapel decorated with paintings by Berthold Imhoff.



Included in the expansion project of 1928-29 in Humboldt, was a larger chapel decorated with painting by Berthold Imhoff.

Like the people of the area, the sisters struggled with the economic constraints of the 1930s. Patients were often unable to pay for their hospital care. People offered their produce as payment, or members of the family worked for the hospital to pay off their debt. The sisters never turned anyone away, but served everyone equally, whether or not they could pay.

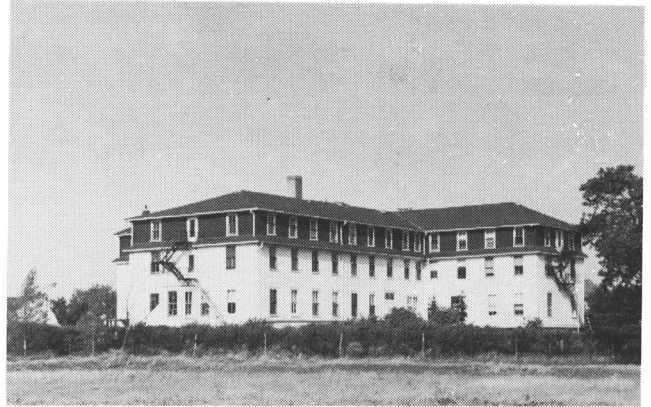
They had to work hard and long hours because they could not afford to hire lay staff. There were few medications in those early days and no antibiotics. Nursing procedures, care and recovery depended largely on basic nursing treatments which were time-consuming.

The nurses were responsible for total patient care, including the environment. The work was difficult and demanding. The sisters relied on prayer to sustain themselves and to mediate the healing power of God for their patients.

Despite meagre income, the sisters continued in their efforts to provide adequate and efficient services to the sick in their hospitals. Their skilful development of the farm, orchard and gardens provided the hospital and congregation with much of the necessary food and produce.

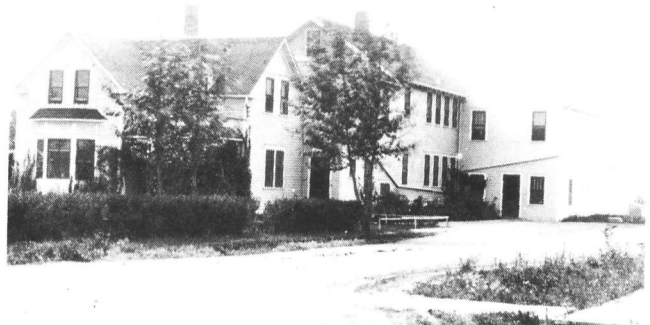
In the midst of hard times the congregation accepted yet another request for service, from the

Oblates of St. Mary's Province, who had started a minor seminary at Battleford. The sisters agreed to take over the kitchen and laundry services at St. Charles Scholasticate, Battleford, thus contributing to the education of youth and the training and support of priests.



St. Charles' Scholasticate, Battleford, where the Sisters began providing kitchen and laundry services in 1932 for the Oblates of St. Mary's Province.

A request from Bishop Joseph H. Prud'Homme to take over a hospital in Rosthern was accepted. The unfavorable conditions of the building and the inability of the local community or the sisters to replace the hospital caused the congregation to withdraw after two years.



St. John's Hospital, property of the Diocese of Prince Albert was operated by the Sisters from 1935-38.

The single most influential event of the 1940s was the establishment of the Saskatchewan Hospital Services Plan. This plan greatly influenced the operation of the hospitals belonging to the community. Once approved, the hospital was ensured a reliable source of income.

Government requirements at that time were small in comparison to the benefits for the hospital and the improved services the sisters were able to provide to the patients. The plan enabled the sisters to employ more lay staff and eased the burden carried by the sisters. As services improved, the sisters were required to take more advanced education to remain qualified for their work.

New needs emerge

New needs were emerging within the congregation. As the number of Canadian candidates increased it became evident that the language and some of the traditions of the missionaries from Austria had to be abandoned or adapted.

Tension was mounting as the sisters attempted to be faithful in their service to the sick and still maintain a monastic lifestyle. Planning and progress were seriously hampered because all decisions in financial and administrative matters required the permission of the local ordinary.



Sister Florianne Kohlman, first Canadian superior general, elected in 1949. She served a total of 15 years in this capacity.

The breakthrough of these mounting needs came with the election of the first Canadian superior general, Sister Florianne Kohlman, in 1949. In a recent interview with Sister Florianne, she shared her efforts and struggle of this time in the history of the community.

The changes began with the translation of prayers and statues from German to English. The European custom of having two classes of sisters — choir and lay — was abandoned because it did not serve a need in our Canadian culture.

Until this time the community had lived by the European constitutions and statues. Many hours of research and efforts were expended in formulating a Canadian constitution. The congregation is indebted to Father Michael Harding, OFM, a canonist, who helped prepare the new constitution and incorporate the Franciscan heritage. This new constitution received approval from Rome in 1952.

Following the approval of the constitution, an

application was submitted to Rome to obtain pontifical status for the congregation. This was a much-desired goal, as it removed the congregation from the immediate authority of the local Ordinary in certain internal matters.

It was difficult or next to impossible to make plans, Sister Florianne explained, when these plans were always subject to approval by the local church authority. In order to have greater freedom and authority over their own affairs, it was necessary



Mt. St. Francis Retreat House, Cochrane, Alta.



St. Anthony's College, Edmonton.



St. Ann's Home, Clarence Ave., Saskatoon.

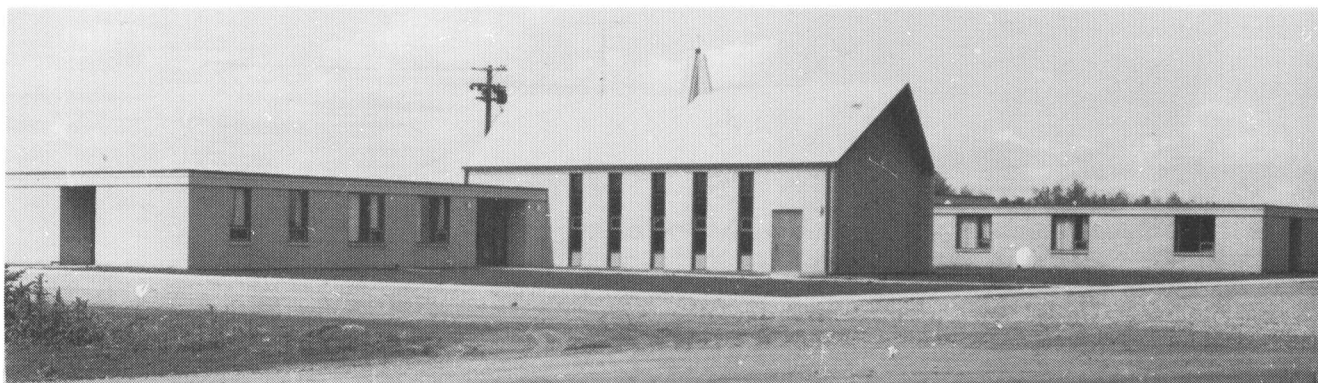
that the community gain pontifical status.

One of the chief requirements to obtain this status was that a congregation had to be working in five different dioceses and submit a letter of support from each bishop. In order to meet this requirement, houses were opened at Mt. St. Francis Retreat House in Cochrane, Alta., and at St. Anthony's College in Edmonton in the early 1950s.

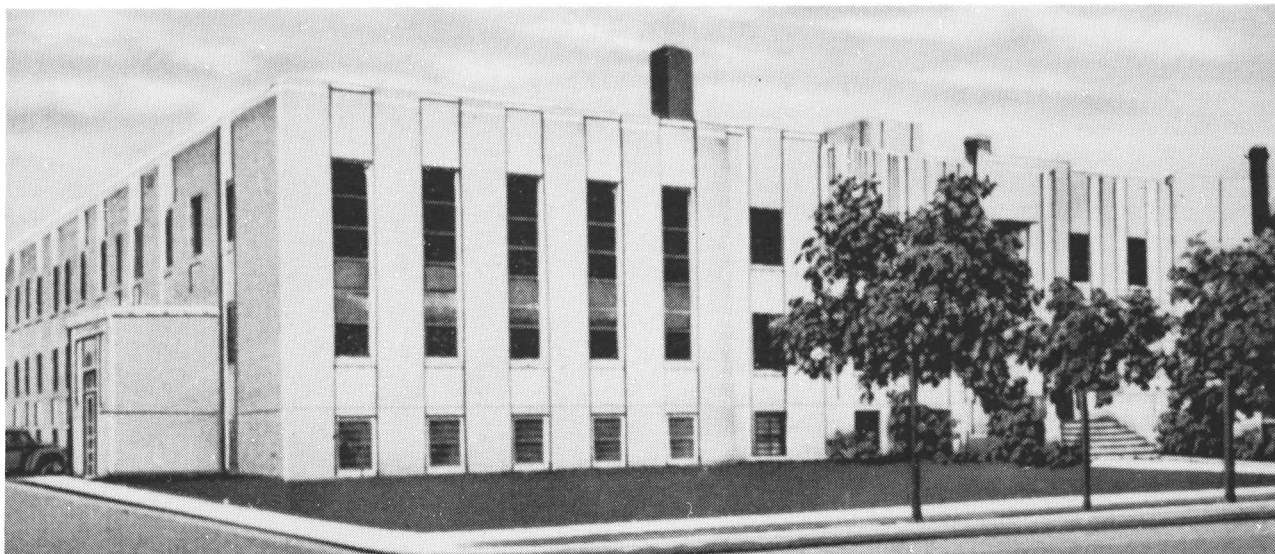
Upon invitation of Bishop Francis Klein the community took over the operation of a private nursing home, renamed St. Anne's Home, in Saskatoon. Now there were sisters working in the dioceses of Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Prince Albert and St. Peter's Abbacy. On May 23, 1953, the community received the coveted status of a pontifical congregation.



St. Michael's Retreat, Lumsden, Sask.



St. Mary's Villa was administered initially by the Sisters of St. Elizabeth.



Holy Infant Hospital, Hoven, South Dakota.

Vatican II and beyond

The Golden Jubilee in 1961 launched the congregation into adaptations called for by Vatican II. These years were characterized by tertianships, workshops on renewal and preparations for the changes anticipated in the church.

Many of the sisters pursued upgrading and retraining in order to meet the growing demand for better qualifications for their professional work. The late '60s were hard times of struggle for adaptation and renewal. Transition is always painful and change always comes at a cost — the congregation was not spared in this regard.

In the apostolic area, the sisters weathered the Medicare crisis of 1962. Invitations were accepted to administer St. Mary's Villa, the municipal nursing home in Humboldt, as well as a hospital at Hoven, South Dakota. Services were extended to St. Michael's Retreat House in Lumsden, Sask., and for a short while the sisters operated a student residence in Saskatoon. And in answer to the invitation of Pope John XXIII, two sisters went to the missions in Brazil.

If we were to compare the decades of the '60s and '70s, it seems that the renewal moved from exterior adaptation to interior renewal. Time, effort and resources were channelled to assist individual sisters to take opportunities for personal renewal. During this time the sisters took advantage of 30-day retreats, directed retreats and/or a sabbatical year of study.

The congregation intensified its search to identify its special gift within the church and tried to find new ways of serving in that same spirit. There was a move away from establishing and maintaining institutions, and toward allowing individuals to choose the apostolates that best suited their gifts.



Sister Justina Wirachowsky, makes her daily home care visits.



The pastoral care team of St. Elizabeth Hospital.



Sister Patricia Trainor, engaged in marriage tribunal work.



Sister Lucy Stang assists one of the women at Alverna Home, our home for the handicapped.

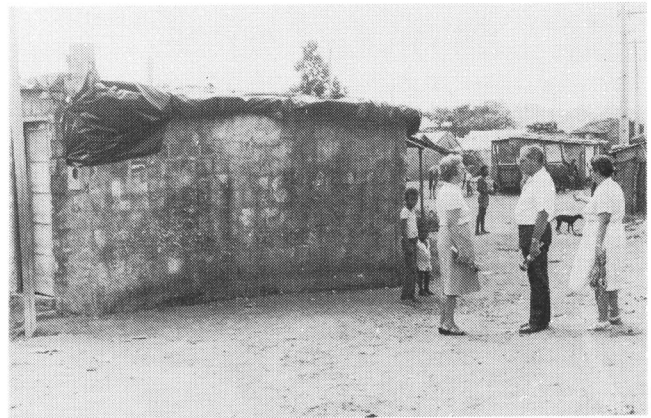
The scope of health care broadened and sisters became involved in public health nursing, home care, massage, care of the handicapped, pastoral care in hospitals and nursing homes, being administrators in hospitals and nursing homes in remote areas.

Other sisters in the name of the congregation undertook to meet recognized needs in our society,

like marriage tribunal work, teaching, catechetics, work with the deaf and missions in Africa and Brazil.



Sister Delphine Berschiminsky, tending to a patient at her massage clinic.



Sr. Marcella Haag and Sr. Immaculata Saretsky in Salvador, Brazil.



Sr. Viola Bens, Director of Religious Education, Ile a la Crosse and missions.

Looking ahead

What is there to be said of the call of the 1980s?

There is definitely a call to work in collaboration with laity — to support and share with them our work and dreams for the future. We wish to continue to respond to the needs of our society around us.

The reality of an aging community is that we no longer have personnel to sustain our traditional community apostolates nor to establish new ones. We are forced by our circumstances to concentrate on building up and supporting our most valuable resource — each individual.

In this 75th Jubilee year, we take pride in our accomplishments and rejoice and give thanks to God for his love and strength which has sustained us through the years.

Carrying on the tradition of reliance on prayer, we courageously go forth into the next phase of our congregation's history to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

