



Foundations

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St. Bernard Convalescent Hospital, Toronto, Ontario 1954 – 1991

Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood (CPS)

by Greg J. Humbert

MISSIONARY SISTERS OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD

The story of the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood (CPS) begins in 1885 in an adventurous way in South Africa near Durban. Abbot Francis Pfanner, an Austrian Trappist, lived in the strictly contemplative and secluded Trappist Monastery of Mariawald near Aachen, Germany. From there he laid the foundation of a new monastery in Banja Luka, Bosnia, and was earmarked to become the abbot of this new monastery.



Abbot Francis Pfanner in South Africa

But as often happens in the history of religious communities, things turned out quite differently. A bishop of South Africa was in urgent need of missionaries for his diocese, and instead of becoming abbot, Francis Pfanner, together with a group of monks, travelled to South Africa to answer this need. Although they were “silent monks” nonetheless they were asked to make the land arable near Durban and give witness to their faith through their way of living.

Francis Pfanner was a man gifted with true understanding for the concerns of the people around him.

Soon he realized that he had to find dedicated women, who would work with and for the people and respond to their needs. He realized they could not lead a silent contemplative life behind cloistered walls, but rather had to be engaged in charitable and social activities, especially in formal instructions in schools and in teaching the faith.

Paramount was the need to instruct the people on various manual skills and farming techniques that would improve their lives and wellbeing. It became particularly important to him that the children and adults be taught and instructed regardless of the color of their skin, their race or religion. This philosophy of life based on Gospel values greatly annoyed the colonial government of South Africa at that time. Nonetheless Abbot Francis persisted in this approach remaining especially interested in the training and education of girls and women.

This became the beginning of the congregation of the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood. Mother Paula Emunds, a woman who joined in the early days shaped and influenced the new congregation. She led the new community of young women and implemented the visions that Abbot Francis Pfanner had outlined. Her willingness to work hard and her feminine intuition helped the Sisters demonstrate to the people something of the human, compassionate



Mother Paula Emunds

and redeeming love of Christ by striving to be witnesses through a life of joy, hope and reconciliation.

The conviction best expressed in the statement, “our mission territory is the kingdom of God and that has no boundaries“, shaped the fast growing community. In South Africa as well as in Europe more and more missions were inaugurated.

At present about 900 Sisters work in more than 90 mission stations all over the world. The Sisters live and work in many countries in Africa, as well as in the United States, Canada, Papua New Guinea, Germany, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal and Korea. They strive to make tangible the love of God which they believe is the wellspring of their life. They do this particularly in the fields of education and health care, in social welfare, in areas of domestic and agricultural work, in the wide field of pastoral care, through art and craft, and by fostering mission awareness.

The Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood first arrived in the United States from the Netherlands in 1925 at the invitation of the Vincentian priests. Ministering under their motto “Ora et Labora” (Pray and Work) became evident as they set about their humble and trusting service.

ARRIVAL IN CANADA

In 1950, the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood were invited, at the invitation of the late Cardinal James McGuigan, to come to Canada from the Netherlands to originally take over a small military hospital (barracks) in Ajax, Ontario. The parishes of Ajax and Pickering readily agreed to assist the Sisters in this undertaking. Eight Sisters arrived in Toronto on February 1, 1951.

They were penniless, friendless, and unaccustomed to the ways of their adopted country. The original plan to operate the small hospital in Ajax fell through shortly after they arrived, and for a time it appeared that the Sisters would have to abandon this noble project and return to the Netherlands. However, they refused to accept defeat.

True to the saying, “when God closes one door he opens another” they decided to pray, work, and struggle to find a new path. As they sorted out this new path they made their temporary home with the Sisters of St.

Joseph at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Toronto who gladly offered hospitality and welcome. The Loretto Sisters also hosted two of the congregation’s Sisters who were teachers by profession.

THE SISTERS PURCHASE LAND

With fearless hearts and a large dose of common sense they soon acquired their first home on Indian Road in Toronto in the summer of 1953 not far from St. Joseph’s Hospital where they had found refuge. The Sisters’ zeal, selfless determination and their professional competence as nurses attracted the attention of the local community. Soon they were able to establish an Advisory Board of leading business and professional men and to organize a Ladies’ Auxiliary of prominent women.

All this paid off. Finally, in June of 1954 the Sisters were able to buy the “Shadow Brooke” estate and house at 685 Finch Avenue West in Willowdale, Ontario located in the district of North York of Toronto. It was a beautiful large home surrounded by 19 acres of landscaped grounds.

Shadow Brooke had an interesting history prior to the Sisters purchasing it. The estate had initially been the property of Senator Frederic Nicholls, a Canadian businessman, electrical engineer and politician. He commissioned a home to be designed by the architectural firm Dunnington-Grubb Howard Mathers & Haldenby. The large mansion was constructed around 1915 for Senator Nichols and his family.

Then from 1925-1947 Shadow Brooke became the home of Hamilton B. Wills, an American from Boston who had moved to Toronto and became a successful mining stock broker and philanthropist.

Finally, the property was then sold to a Dr. Gordon Bell, who re-purposed the home from a private residence to an alcoholic treatment centre which he operated there until 1954 when it was purchased by the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood.

A NEW HOSPITAL IS ESTABLISHED AND EXPANDED

Because of the renovations made for the previous social purpose as a treatment centre the buildings were well suited for conversion into a 22-bed convalescent hospital

St. Bernards Convalescent Hospital, Toronto, Ontario

that would be named St. Bernard's Convalescent Hospital.

Shortly after its opening the hospital was filled to capacity. The official opening was performed by the Honourable Leslie Frost, Premier of Ontario. The need for more beds increased. Mother Ethelberta, as "foundress" along with the untiring, selfless assistance of the Advisory Board decided to build a new 60-bed convalescent hospital on the property.



Cornerstone of new hospital building

A building Fund Campaign was approved and the goal of \$594,000 was set and realized. With a lot of faith and prayers on behalf of the Sisters, the construction of the new building commenced in September 1957, and by August 1958, the new

hospital building was completed and officially opened in September of that year.

In 1964 a new building was designed by the Mathers & Halderby architectural firm, the same firm that designed the original mansion on the

property. This building contained rooms for staff, a caretakers apartment, laundry, sewing room and rooms for the Sisters, and was built by McNamara Construction Company.

Mother Ethelberta provided effective and efficient leadership to this hospital through all the difficult phases of the changing health care system until her retirement as Administrator on June 14, 1982. At that time, she handed over the responsibilities to Sister Norbert Wind. The Hospital was incorporated on January 27, 1970.

An increase in demand for Rehabilitation Therapy by the referring physicians of patients prompted a new wing to be added to St. Bernard's Convalescent Hospital early in 1970 for this specific purpose. Since most patients required some sort of orthopaedic, cardiac or neurological follow up, a daily program of exercise was instituted early in the hospital's existence.

In fact, 80-90% of patients attend some form of rehabilitation therapy. A staff made up of three physiotherapists, one occupational therapist and one activity director, along with 28 rehabilitation nurses composed the treatment team in the 1970s. Other services were added in time. Several consultants in rehabilitation speech and audiology, psycho-gerontology became



Sr. Ethelberta Benstein, CPS
Hospital Administrator, 1954-1982



Sr. Norbert Wind, CPS
Hospital Administrator, 1982-1999



The Sisters' Novitiate building, built in 1960 on the left, and the Convent Chapel (pink stucco) on the right.



St. Bernard's Hospital. Convent and chapel to the left.

available and utilized when needed. A part-time home care coordinator also became available to assist in the transition of a patient from the hospital setting to their home. Patients received nursing, therapy and/or homemaking assistance until they became independent. A part-time social worker also joined the staff of St. Bernard's Hospital in May of 1982.

Professional development of staff became increasingly important. As a result, the hospital instituted an in-service-education program for all nursing and rehabilitation staff. Guest speakers provided lectures on professional expertise once a month on a wide variety of subjects relevant to current needs in the hospital.

For this purpose, and to enhance other programs and facilities, a 3,000 square foot addition was completed and opened on February 18, 1987.

This new addition to the hospital provided space for a multi-purpose room, a staff library, hairdressing salon for patients, plus offices for a home care and nursing staff. All the above services provide the best opportunity for patients to attain their optimum rehabilitation potential before returning home.

The aim of the Hospital was to provide professional service and care for all patients in order to meet their particular needs for rehabilitation. This was

accomplished with competence, understanding, genuine love, compassion and consideration in accordance with the highest standards of professionalism.

On July 19, 1991, the name of the hospital was changed from St. Bernard's Convalescent Hospital to simply St. Bernard's Hospital.

As a result of the Government of Ontario's restructuring policy and program, St. Bernard's Hospital closed on December 31, 1999.

The Sisters made the decision at that time to change ministries and to re-open the hospital building in 2001 as a 44 bed retirement residence known as the St. Bernard's Residence.

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