

## SISTER MARY AGNES SUTHERLAND (1926–2018)

On 16 August 2018, a funeral mass was held in St. Albert, Alberta for Sister Mary Agnes Sutherland, who passed away on 10 August at the age of 92. She left her mark in social service and writing. Of Scottish and French heritage, she was born in Fort Chipewyan on 6 April 1926, one of seven children of John Colin Sutherland, a marine engineer, and Elsie Paradis. She attended the Holy Angels Roman Catholic School in Fort Chipewyan until completing Grade 7, after which she attended Legal Public School, in the town of Legal in central Alberta, for Grades 8 to 10. Afterwards, she obtained her high school diploma by correspondence. Early on she developed a religious vocation, and it was probably natural that she entered the novitiate of the Grey Nuns at St. Albert in August 1943, given the importance of the Grey Nuns in education and social services in the Canadian West and North, including northern Alberta, since the 1860s.

Before taking her vows, she began a teaching career, obtaining the Junior Diploma through the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, which allowed her to teach Grades 1 to 10; later she upgraded her qualifications to a Permanent Standard E Certificate. She first taught in St. Albert for two years and then went to Blue Quills Indian Residential School (near St. Paul, her mother's home town), which was established in 1931 to serve seven nearby reserves. After a year at the Mother House in Montreal, she returned to St. Albert and the Provincial House, to study there and at the University of Alberta. Sister Agnes took her final vows in February 1951 and taught in various places including Fort McMurray (St. John's) and Fort Smith (both in Mission and federal day schools). She received her Bachelor of Education from the University of Alberta in 1961. Her abilities as a teacher led to her appointment as principal of the school in Fort McMurray. After a number of years, she relocated to Fort Smith to begin another facet of her career.

In Fort Smith, Sister Agnes worked in the Secretariat of the Diocese and did social work. Her vocation led her naturally to religious education, and she was named Director of Religious Education for the Diocese of Mackenzie and Fort Smith. During her time as director, she obtained a Master of Education Degree (Religious Education) at Wright College in Spokane, Washington. After study in Rome, she returned to Fort Smith. As director, she travelled throughout the western Northwest Territories (NWT), training teachers and providing resources for them.

During her time in Fort Smith, Sister Agnes became more interested in social issues, especially as they related to Indigenous peoples. Her work drew her to various programs and courses dealing with drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, child abuse, elder abuse, disabled persons abuse, suicide, and youth justice. As a teacher she had organized clubs and other activities for youth. Concern about these issues led to the opening of the first women's shelter in



Sister Mary Agnes Sutherland, circa 2000.

Fort Smith, initially housed at the old St. Anne's Hospital where she had her office. Women and children would eat in the cafeteria with the Sisters and priests, while children had a playroom they called "Disneyland." The initiative also dealt with the homeless, abused, and victims of family violence. She indicated that clients came from everywhere from Tuktoyaktuk to Rankin Inlet to Fort Resolution. This was the first women's shelter in the Territories until one was established in Yellowknife. It was named Sutherland House out of respect for Sister Agnes. When the Tawow (Cree for *welcome*) Society was established to run the House, she served on the Board of Directors. Her social activism also involved organizing a registered society for senior citizens and disabled persons. Monthly meetings of interdenominational hospital pastoral care, as well as visits to the Women's Correctional Centre and support for immigrant families, illustrated a busy life of advocacy. She also acted as a translator in the courts and served on a number of boards, including as an advisor to the RCMP, other legal bodies, and the Friendship Centre. Another area of work was assisting people who had been adopted or placed away from home and who had lost contact with their family; this included genealogy work.

After her tenure as Director of Religious Education, Sister Agnes was involved in a number of studies and surveys. At the request of the Separate School Board, she

conducted an assessment of Indigenous students attending the separate school in Yellowknife. Later, the Department of Social Services of the Government of the Northwest Territories asked her to survey needs for a seniors' facility in Fort Smith. The result was the Northern Lights Personal Care Home. In addition, the government contracted her to undertake an intensive study of all personal care facilities in the Territories. In recognition of her work, in 1990 she was granted an Honorary Certificate in Social Services by Arctic College. At least as significant, since it reflected her standing amongst the Métis, was her engagement by the Métis Heritage Project in 1992 to interview some 12 Métis elders, with questions provided by the Métis Association.

Sister Agnes Sutherland's influence in the wider northern society was not confined to her involvement in social service, which included writing articles about matters of concern to Northerners. She was also an author, but described herself as "historienne" in a document for the Mother House. She first published a book even before she left as Director of Religious Education: a souvenir album in 1984 that honoured the 50th year of ordination and 75th birthday of Bishop Piché, who was noted as a bit of a reformer. It was an illustrated history of the Roman Catholic Mission in the Mackenzie River area from the 1840s. Six years later, she transcribed and published *Living Kindness: The Dream of My Life: The Memoirs of Metis Elder, Madeline Bird*. The book dealt with the traditional lifestyle, the role of the church in Bird's life, living conditions experienced by women, and a contrast between conflicting beliefs in the bush and in town. Madeline Bird pointed out that the Métis were a bridge between conflicting beliefs. Within a month, 700 copies were sold, and by 1996 all 2000 were sold.

As she had worked with Bishop Piché for most of her career, it was perhaps natural that Sister Agnes would write *The Bishop Who Cared: A Legacy of Leadership*, in 1995. In an article in *Arctic*, Rosa Van Camp (1989) illustrated the leadership by detailing her experiences at Grandin College, established by Piché for Indigenous students, at which Native languages were spoken and many future leaders were educated. Sister Agnes later wrote that she was approached by Northerners to write about the missionary Grey Nuns. Although books had been written about Oblate bishops and priests, none had been written on the Sisters. Although initially reluctant, Sister Agnes realized that having been Director of Religious Education for 16 years, she knew more than she thought and she had always been quick to acknowledge the work of other Sisters. She

travelled across the country to interview people, stating that no Northerner invited refused to be interviewed. The result of the interviews with 37 Sisters and others was *The Illustrated Northerners Say: Thanks, Sisters*, published in 1996. The title was suggested by Northerners themselves. Finally Sister Agnes wrote and published a family history, *Challenges Galore*.

In 2010 Sister Agnes moved to Youville House in St. Albert, where she passed away in August 2018, aged 92.

Her personality shone through her work. Lynne Brooks, executive director of the Status of Women of the NWT when Sister Agnes was a regional vice president of the board from 1991 to 1995, reflected that she was an invaluable, smart, funny, caring, tireless worker, and above all dedicated to the welfare of women and children. The Status of Women Council of the NWT awarded her the Wise Woman Award in 2005. The Member of the Legislature for Yellowknife Centre, Julie Green, indicated that she was a gift to all, while in the Legislative Assembly, Minister of Justice Louis Sebert spoke of her books and her dedication as an advocate for women seeking shelter when fleeing abusive relationships and a driving force behind shelters, as well as a strong advocate for seniors and those with disabilities. Bishop Piché often called her "Sister Steamroller." There is a story of her seeing the snowploughs piling snow on sidewalks in front of seniors' homes, and as a result she went to the town hall and demanded that the sidewalk be shovelled. It could be said, as it was of a contemporary, Father René Fumoleau, that she coloured outside the lines.

In her photographs, she seems radiant. Some reflected she always had a sparkle in her eyes. In both her work and her writing, Sister Agnes Sutherland not only demonstrated a love for the North, but most importantly was a passionate advocate for its people, especially the vulnerable.

#### REFERENCES

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