

Alberta honours Catholic sisters' service

Stelmach unveils bronze monument on legislature grounds

By Covenanthealth.ca
Edmonton Journal
October 1, 2011

A new addition to the Alberta legislature grounds recognizes the courageous and intrepid religious women who helped to found the province, providing health care, education and social services to pioneer communities.

A bronze monument unveiled Wednesday honours all the congregations of Catholic sisters who served across the province and celebrates their legacy of care and compassion carried on by others today.

"This monument serves as a powerful tribute to the impact the Catholic sisters have had on so many lives in our province, including my own. As a young child, I experienced the care and compassion of the Catholic sisters first-hand, and this is a fitting way to honour their service, dedication, and care to countless Albertans," Premier Ed Stelmach said at the unveiling.

The Catholic Sisters' Legacy Recognition Project was led by Covenant Health in collaboration with the Catholic community. The monument was funded by donations from various organizations and individuals.

"They taught school, fed the hungry, visited the distraught, housed orphans and tended the sick. These were no small tasks when you consider how little they had and how primitive conditions were," said Gordon Self, executive sponsor of the Catholic Sisters' Legacy Recognition Project.

"It is from these humble beginnings that we have been able to build the Catholic schools, hospitals and social agencies we are so proud of today."

More than 70 orders of sisters have served in Alberta in the past 150 years. The first were three Sisters of Charity of Montreal (Grey Nuns) who arrived in Lac Ste. Anne on Sept. 24, 1859. They were among the first Caucasian women who arrived in the region before Confederation.

In September 1863, the Grey Nuns opened a new convent in St. Albert, which operated as the first hospital, orphanage and school, in what was then the Northwest Territories.

"I am very grateful, it is wonderful recognition," says Sister Annata Brockman about the tribute to all the Sisters who have made contributions in Alberta. "My hope is it will inspire others to carry on our work."

Local artist Herman Poulin from St. Paul, Alta., was commissioned to create the Catholic Sisters' Legacy Recognition monument, Service Through Christ.

For Poulin, the project brought him back to his childhood and stirred feelings of gratitude.

"To work on the sisters' project is an honour. It is full circle for me." says Herman. "In my primary school years, it was the sisters who helped me discover my talent as a young artist. They called it a gift.

"Today, it is my turn to honour and respect my mentors."

The 10-foot bronze statue of a sister holding a piece of stained glass stands on a pedestal engraved with the names of the religious orders of sisters who served in Alberta. The bronze figure moves through a foundation pillar and incorporates a crucifix around her neck, which Poulin defines as the source of her inner strength and purpose.

"Her movement exudes service" says Poulin. The figure in traditional dress strides forward, one heel up.

"The flow of her long dress and her apron symbolize many tasks to do."

A video celebrating the sisters' legacy is in production and will be premiered at Covenant Health's annual community meeting Oct. 5 and released on covenanthealth.ca later that month.

THEIR LEGACY

Contributions by Catholic sisters to Alberta's history:

- The sisters established 44 hospitals, 67 schools and 62 social services, including soup kitchens, clothes for the children, immigrant services, orphanages, care for the elderly, boarding schools for unwed mothers, counselling services and activities for teens.

- Religious missions played a key role in the founding of 49 towns and cities in Alberta.

Some of the firsts by religious women in Alberta's history:

- On Aug. 3, 1859, a 53-day excursion would bring three Sisters of Charity of Montreal Grey Nuns from St. Boniface, Man., to Lac Sainte Anne. Sister Emery, Sister Adele and Sister Alphonse, all 23 years old, were the first three nuns to visit or reside in Alberta; the three sisters were the third, fourth and fifth non-native women to travel to Alberta. They arrived Sept. 24, 1859.

- In 1863, the Grey Nuns opened a new convent in St. Albert, which operated as the first hospital and orphanage, and a school in the Northwest Territories.