



ATLANTIC ASSOCIATE RESPONDS TO GOD'S CALL



By Ellen Robart ~ The song "We Are Called" by composer David Haas, based on the scripture passage Micah 6:8, calls the people of God into action. "We are called to act with justice. We are called to love tenderly. We are called to serve one another and to walk humbly with God."

These same words give meaning to my own life as a wife, mother and grandmother. They are the cornerstone and give direction to my journey as an Associate of the Sisters of Charity and guided me during my 16-year career as an educational assistant.

My life's journey is embedded in the memories of a young girl growing up on the lower west side of Saint John. I was the fourth of eight children and the first daughter born to Olga and Alfred MacDonald. We belonged to Our Lady of the Assumption Parish. The unexpected death of our oldest brother Pat shattered our family and set adrift a young girl of 10 into a sea of grief and loss.

It was during my junior high school years at St. Patrick's that I began to emerge from my grief into the warm glow of light emitted from two fun-loving, high energy Sisters of Charity named Sister Ian and Sister Maxwell. Together they opened the doors for the "Hi Y" youth group and would organize games, play guitar, lead sing songs and share sponge toffee. At the end of the night it was always a treat to walk them home.

Sister Ian would also become my first basketball coach and that sport would later lead me to an induction into the Saint John Sports Hall of Fame. Reflecting back, there is no doubt the Sisters' joyful and spirit-filled presence provided the fertile ground to plant the seed of God.

I continued my secondary education and catechetical studies at St. Vincent's High School. Aside from academics and catechesis, the Sisters also instilled in us the need to have a social conscience. We would organize walkathons, participate in food drives and fundraisers and contribute to the general well-being of our school community. The seeds of charity and the call to serve the needs of the greater community had been planted.

Many years would pass before I would reconnect with the Sisters. However, their teachings and their way of life became beacons of light to guide me throughout my life's journey.

My vocation as a mother, grandmother, pre-school teacher, recreation supervisor and educational assistant have one golden thread connecting them -- the gift of children in my life. Children have taught me life's most important lessons. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matt. 18:5).

Sharing God's Gifts

In 1977, my husband Maynard and I were married at Our Lady of the Assumption Parish. We moved to the Kennebecasis Valley where we raised our two children. It was in 1979 that I heard about a new Catholic parish named St. Mark's. As the church was still under construction, the people would gather at alternate sites for Mass.

One Sunday I asked a friend how to become part of the music ministry. He pointed me in the direction of the piano and said you need to see Sister Doreen McGuire. It would be the first parish ministry I was called to and 37 years later the St. Mark's music ministry continues to fill my heart and soul with joy.

Under the guidance of our pastoral team -- Sister McGuire and Father Kevin Barry -- the people of St. Mark's were encouraged to take responsibility for our role as disciples of Christ. We were given many opportunities to become educated in all aspects of parish life.

We were well rooted and when the time seemed right we would take a leap of faith and spread our wings and fly. Certainly the words of our founding parish priest, Father Barry, continue to be etched in our DNA: "You, the people, are the church."

In 1999, with many years of experience as a catechist, music minister, lector and parish coordinator for communion of the sick, I responded to an invitation to apply to the two-year diocesan lay pastoral ministry formation program. It was during my second year that I was unexpectedly reconnected with Sister Ian -- someone whose influence as a mentor and teacher I carried with me for many years.

It had been 35 years since we bid our last goodbyes. When we met face to face at the entrance to Rocmaura Nursing Home in Saint John it seemed as if time had stood still. It took only a few short minutes to rekindle the gift of her friendship and reconnect to her spirit-filled presence.

And so it was Sister Ian, my good friend Sister Margaret MacLean, who invited me to an inquirers' gathering to discern a possible calling as an Associate of the Sisters of Charity. It was 15 years ago on Dec. 8, 2001 at Carmel Chapel in Saint John that I made my first commitment as an SCIC Associate.

Today I am a member of the Atlantic regional Associate team. The Associate relationship and calling requires only that I respond to the needs of those living in poverty in my daily life by acting justly, loving tenderly and walking humbly with our God. In the words of SCIC foundress Honoria Conway, "Laus Deo" (Praise be to God)! *(Photo of Ellen Robart by Gertrude Mulholland, SCIC)*