

**Religious Women in Nova Scotia:
A Struggle for Autonomy. A Sketch of the
Sisters of
St. Martha of Antigonish, Nova Scotia,
1900-1960**

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PRE-FOUNDING HISTORY

In the past few years many religious communities have found a need for story telling. The retelling, reinterpreting, and reliving of the stories of our founders and foundresses have led to a reawakening of the spirit, mission and charism of our religious families. The love, courage, and spirit of adventure of the pioneer sisters inspire us anew and challenge us to emulate them. A large part of our renewal has been carried forward by this search into our past. The brief story that I am about to retell, although simple, humble and downright ordinary, proves yet again what people of dedication and courage can accomplish.

Back in the 1880's and 90's, St. Francis Xavier University, established in 1855 in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, faced financial trouble because of difficulties in obtaining and keeping a permanent staff for the household needs of the university. At that time the university was a preseminary for young men as well as a regular academic university. The Church in eastern Nova Scotia was dependent on the university for the initial training of young men who planned to study for the priesthood. To accomplish this work with the finances available, St. F.X. University needed efficient household management. The comfort and well-being of the staff and students was of great concern to both the Bishop of the Diocese and the administration of the university.

By the early 1890's the student body had greatly expanded. Bishop John Cameron, Bishop of Antigonish and Chancellor of the university, along with Dr. Daniel Chisholm, Rector of the university, realized that it was crucial to reorganize the domestic arrangements. To this end they contacted several religious communities with the hope of obtaining sisters who would take over the household management of the university. Our archives contain copies of

letters to several communities requesting their assistance.¹ None of these efforts to get sisters from outside the diocese and the province met with success.

In 1894 Bishop Cameron contacted Mother M. Bonaventure, Superior General of the Sisters of Charity of Halifax, to seek her help in solving the household personnel problem. Recently discovered letters, written in 1897 by Mother Mary Fidelis to Doctor Daniel Chisholm, state that in 1893 Archbishop Cornelius O'Brien of Halifax had given the Sisters of Charity permission to establish within their own congregation a "Sisterhood," an auxiliary branch, whose members would be devoted to the household management of educational institutions operated by the Sisters of Charity.² These sisters became known as auxiliary Sisters of St. Martha. Apparently, Bishop Cameron knew about this "Sisterhood" and had made arrangements with Mother Bonaventure for the training of some girls from the Antigonish Diocese, since by 1894 Mother Bonaventure was preparing for the reception of girls from the Antigonish Diocese to train with the Sisters of Charity. These candidates from the diocese for the auxiliary group were to return to St. F.X. University and continue to function as an institute of auxiliary sisters under the Sisters of Charity. Their membership was to be increased by the addition of candidates from the Antigonish Diocese.

In a letter to Bishop Cameron, dated May 8, 1894, Mother Bonaventure outlined the details of the plan, stating, "We shall be prepared to receive any who present themselves by the first of September."³ On May 22, 1894, Bishop Cameron sent a circular letter to the priests of the diocese asking them to "look through your congregation for such persons as may be fit to join the new order."⁴ The contents of this letter seem to indicate that it was on his suggestion that the auxiliary order of Sisters of St. Martha was being founded in 1894. On the other hand, Mother Fidelis, the Superior General of the Sisters of Charity who succeeded Mother Bonaventure, and who was the Superior General at the time the sisters were to come to Antigonish in 1897, maintained that the "Sisterhood" of the auxiliary sisters had been established a year before Bishop Cameron asked the Sisters of Charity to include St. F.X. University among the institutes managed by the members of the auxiliary sisters.

Both statements could be correct, depending on how the matter is viewed. In 1894, the development of the institute of auxiliary sisters was in

¹ Letters in Antigonish Diocesan Archives (1893-1894).

² St. Francis Xavier University Archives.

³ Antigonish Diocesan Archives, May 8, 1894.

⁴ Copy of Original Printed Circular, Archives, Sisters of St. Martha, Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

an early stage. Their novitiate seems to have been at the Sisters of Charity convent in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and possibly the novitiate had no more than five members. It appears that, after Mother Bonaventure's agreement with Bishop Cameron, the novitiate was transferred to the motherhouse in Halifax in order to receive the candidates from the Diocese of Antigonish, as well as candidates from other dioceses. It is in this sense that Bishop Cameron could say that Mother Bonaventure had "undertaken to found... an order of auxiliary sisters" even though the institute had already existed in a less developed stage.⁵

Several young women responded to the appeal of Bishop Cameron for recruits for the new community. In the fall of 1894 at least three candidates from the diocese entered the novitiate established at Mount St. Vincent.⁶ Between 1894 and 1900, thirty-one candidates from the Antigonish Diocese went to Mount St. Vincent, Halifax.

The basic spiritual formation of the candidates, as well as training in work skills, was provided by a novice mistress and a mistress of work, both Sisters of Charity. The auxiliary Sisters of St. Martha had their own rules and regulations, distinct from the Sisters of Charity.⁷ Several auxiliary Sisters of St. Martha who entered in 1894 made profession on June 30, 1897. One made profession on July 2, 1898, and several on July 9, 1899.

In the meantime, a convent that could accommodate twenty-five sisters was constructed at St. F.X. University. Prior to the arrival of ten auxiliary Sisters of St. Martha and three Sisters of Charity in July 1897, a lively exchange of differing viewpoints passed between Dr. Daniel Chisholm, Rector of St. F.X. University, and Mother M. Fidelis, who was elected Superior General of the Sisters of Charity in 1896. The archives of the Sisters of St. Martha contain copies of the original letters of Mother Fidelis in which she differs with Dr. Chisholm about who proposed the original idea of the Sisters of St. Martha; about the modifications of arrangements between Bishop Cameron and Mother Bonaventure; about the cost of maintaining and training of the sisters; and about the scarcity of vocations to the Sisters of St. Martha. This strained relationship seems to have resulted in difficulties which later prompted Bishop Cameron to take matters into his own hands and in 1900 to set up his own diocesan community of Sisters of St. Martha.

Under the direction of three Sisters of Charity, the sisters who arrived in 1897 worked until 1900 in the household department of St. Francis

⁵ *History of the Sisters of St. Martha*, chapter 1, 1894-1930, p. 8 (unpublished), by Sister May Mulvihill.

⁶ *The Casket*, September 20, 1894, p. 8, col. 3.

⁷ Copy of 1897 Constitutions of Sisters of St. Martha, Archives of Sisters of St. Martha.

Xavier, reorganizing, cooking, cleaning, and caring for the sick in the university infirmary. Their days were not without crosses. One sister, Sister Lucy Mailett, who had been professed less than a year, died. Dr. Daniel Chisholm, an original supporter and mentor, resigned as rector because of ill health. However, the sisters' work and their feminine touch were creating a more homelike atmosphere at the university.

The correspondence of the time indicates that by early 1900 Bishop Cameron was preparing to request from the Sisters of Charity that the auxiliary Sisters of St. Martha from his diocese be returned permanently to Antigonish in order to set up their own independent community. According to Sister John Baptist, an early historian of the Sisters of St. Martha, Bishop Cameron had consulted Archbishop O'Brien, had received his approval, and had obtained the consent of Mother Fidelis for his plan.⁸

In July 1900, the Sisters of St. Martha from the various missions of the Sisters of Charity and those who were working at St. F.X. were recalled to Halifax for their annual retreat. Some accounts state that the Archbishop and Bishop understood that Mother M. Fidelis would inform the auxiliary Sisters of St. Martha of the forthcoming plan for separation from the Sisters of Charity, but for reasons which she considered sufficient, she did not acquaint the Sisters of St. Martha from the Antigonish Diocese, in advance, with the plan. On the last day of the retreat, July 12, 1900, the Sisters of St. Martha, twenty-six in number, were called to the assembly hall. Archbishop O'Brien, acting for Bishop Cameron, and under the impression that the plan had already been explained to the sisters, called for volunteers for the Antigonish Diocese. After a brief pause, thirteen sisters stood up to volunteer for Antigonish. The Archbishop gave his blessing to those who volunteered and to those who remained with the Sisters of Charity. The Archbishop also dispensed the sisters, who volunteered, from the vows they had taken to the Sisters of Charity. Later, two other sisters, who were not present at the assembly, volunteered, bringing the number to fifteen.

The first group of three Sisters of St. Martha came to Antigonish on July 16, 1900. A few days later a group of eight arrived. Some weeks later a novice came, and on September 11, the last three came to Antigonish. Looking back in time to that September evening we see these fifteen women: young, inexperienced, with little academic learning, but with enthusiasm, practical wisdom, common sense, and the desire to meet the need that God had shown them through the words of their Bishop.

⁸ *Brief Outline of the Early History of the Sisters of St. Martha* (unpublished), by Sister John Baptist Cameron, 1949.

EXPANSION AND STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY 1900-1920

The Sisters of St. Martha were formally established as an independent community on July 29, 1900. That day they held their first election of superior and novice mistress. The term of office of the superior was for one year because not all the fifteen sisters had arrived. Bishop Cameron presided at the election. Sister Mary Innocentia McNamara was elected superior and Sister Mary Ninian Beaton was elected novice mistress. This latter office was necessary because at least four of the volunteers were novices.

Two candidates joined the new community in Antigonish in the late summer of 1900, and by September two more entered, one of whom did not persevere. We know very little about the prayer life, the work and the play of these eighteen young women during the first year. Father Joseph Mac Donald, Rector of St. Ninian's Cathedral, was their confessor, and Reverend E.J. Devine, S.J., directed their first retreat in the summer of 1901.

Because of the change in status of the new order, it was necessary to revise the 1897 "First Rules and Constitution" which the sisters had received from the Sisters of Charity. New articles regarding their obedience to "the heads of their order in the persons of those who are appointed to direct and govern them," regulations pertaining to the election and qualifications of the superior and novice mistress, provisions for the holding of the chapter, all had to be inserted into the constitution. The chapter was composed of all the sisters of perpetual vows. An article of the constitution stated, "All important matters relating to the community are to be referred to it."⁹ This was collegial indeed; however, the new community's independence was not complete because government was under the direction of the authorities of St. F.X. University. Articles I and III of Chapter II of the constitution state:

The community of the Sisters of St. Martha will be subject in temporal matters to the Board of Governors of St. F.X. College, of which His Lordship, the Bishop of the Diocese, for the time being is President. The college makes itself responsible for the maintenance of the sisters.

The ordinary of the diocese shall be the head of the community. The rector, the vice-rector and one other priest of the college, shall form a council which shall have the power to approve or set aside the choice made by the sisters of one of their number as superior. But its decision shall have no force unless it is ratified by the ordinary.¹⁰

⁹ 1900 Book of Rules, Chapter III.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Other articles of the constitution give this council the power over admittance to the community and for permission to make profession in the community. The council did not have the right to decide upon the religious vocation of candidates. This was reserved for the confessor and canonical superiors. Once a sister made profession, the university guaranteed her support and maintenance, and each member of the community was allowed a monthly wage of two dollars. The superior was to administer these funds.¹¹

The above quoted articles were to cause conflict between the university authorities and the sisters from 1900 until the middle of the second decade. As will be seen later, the resolution of the conflict came in 1917 with the achievement of autonomy by the sisters. In the beginning, the guidance, support and protection of the university council was beneficial for the sisters.

In 1901 Sister M. Faustina MacArthur replaced Sister Innocentia McNamara as the superior. During this year a second revision of the constitution was printed with the Imprimatur of Bishop Cameron. One significant change from the 1900 handwritten version appeared. It omitted the article that gave the university council, mentioned above, authority to veto the sisters' choice of superior. The council still could rule on the eligibility of candidates entering the order. The first public profession ceremony took place at St. Martha's Convent, Antigonish, in September 1901. The first ceremony of perpetual profession of the Sisters of St. Martha occurred in 1905.

From the time the sisters came to Antigonish in July 1900, they had assumed the responsibility for the household management of the university. This included cooking and cleaning for approximately one hundred thirty students, professors, and maintenance staff. The sisters, under the direction of the local physicians, acted as infirmarians for sick students. Since no hospital existed in Antigonish, students with serious diseases were cared for by the sisters. On one occasion, the convent sewing room was used as an operating room for an appendectomy.

In 1902 the sisters opened their first mission when they took over the household management of St. Joseph's Hospital in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia. In 1906, at the request of the residents of Antigonish, and of the practicing physicians in the area, the sisters opened the cottage hospital, and in 1908 three sisters went to Mount Cameron, a home for retired priests, to take over the management of its household. The courage and foresight of the pioneers is evident in the fact that by 1902 two sisters were sent to take training as nurses. Within two years of their founding they were reaching out to meet health care needs. They were not impeded by the university authorities.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

When in 1906 the sisters set up the cottage hospital in Antigonish, the university authorities permitted them to engage in hospital work, but the sisters had to assume the financial responsibilities of running the hospital. They organized campaigns to raise funds for their work, and in 1907 the sisters became incorporated as a legal body in the Province of Nova Scotia. This act gave them the right to ‘Take, purchase and hold real estate and to sell or mortgage the same.’ The hospital proved its worth when an epidemic of typhoid broke out in the Antigonish community in October 1906. By 1907 the hospital was established on the present site of St. Martha’s Hospital. By 1909 the number of sisters in the congregation had increased to forty-one, several of whom were nurses and able to meet the need for hospital personnel.

From 1910 to 1920 the sisters expanded beyond the diocese of Antigonish, attained autonomy from the university, increased their involvement in the fields of nursing care, child care and hospital administration. They responded also to a request to train sisters for a new community – the Sisters of St. Martha of Charlottetown, P.E.I.

Bishop Cameron, our Founder, died in 1910. Dr. H.P. MacPherson presided over the chapter of that year at which Mother Mary Stanislaus was elected superior. She was reelected in 1913. In compliance with canon law, four general councillors were elected to aid the superior in the decision-making process. In 1916 Mother Mary Faustina was again elected superior.

The first mission outside the diocese of Antigonish was undertaken in 1913. Archbishop Neil McNeil of Toronto, who was a native of the diocese of Antigonish, asked the Sisters of St. Martha to assume the responsibility for the household management of St. Augustine’s Seminary, Toronto. Because of the dual authority that existed between the elected heads of the community and the university council of priests some misunderstandings and conflicts were experienced in setting up this mission. In a letter written by Mother Faustina to Dr. H. P. MacPherson, she tells about the anxiety she and Sister Francis de Sales, the first sisters in Toronto, experienced because of the conflict and in decision that went on at “home.” She writes:

We were very glad to get something definite in regard to the sisters coming or not coming.

Later in that same letter she says:

We shall, I trust, “pull through” with the Lord’s help and without any help and little sympathy from our own community, but we hope it will be a long

time before we are placed in such a position again.¹²

Eventually, formal acceptance of the undertaking came from the college authorities and the seven sisters appointed to join the two already at the seminary arrived in Toronto in August 1913.

While the Sisters of St. Martha were still in their “teens,” they were asked by Bishop Henry O’Leary of Charlottetown to train candidates for a sisterhood for the household management of St. Dunstan’s University, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. The circumstances that necessitated the founding of a new independent community were not unlike those faced by Bishop Cameron twenty years earlier. Because of difficulties in obtaining and keeping sisters to do the domestic work at his university, Bishop O’Leary asked Mother Mary Stanislaus if she would undertake to train candidates for this new sisterhood. With the approval of Bishop Morrison and the university authorities, she agreed. In responding to this request, Mother Mary Stanislaus showed her willingness to meet a very different kind of need. Between January and August 1915, four candidates came from Prince Edward Island to begin their formation for the religious life and their skills training for the management of an institution. Unable to wait for completion of their training, Bishop O’Leary asked the sisters to return to Charlottetown in 1916. Mother Mary Stanislaus, whose term of office had expired, and two other sisters from Antigonish, accompanied the four novices to P.E.I. For five years these sisters worked successfully to establish the congregation and to carry out their domestic duties. In 1921 they elected their own superior.*

The most difficult and probably the most progressive move that the sisters made in the second decade was the achievement of their autonomy. They wanted the right to govern their own lives and had to persuade the university authorities to grant them autonomy in all aspects of life: self-government, the right to handle their own finances, and control over admittance into the community.

Since 1900 the sisters had elected their own superior and, in 1901, the university council’s veto of the sisters’ choice of superior had been removed. However, the university council controlled community finances. They supported the sisters, but the salaries which the sisters received from their work in houses, other than St. Martha’s Convent, were set by the university authorities and paid directly to the bursar of that institution. The money

¹² Letter of Mother M. Faustina to Reverend H.P. MacPherson, July 13, 1913.

* After the death of Mother Mary Stanislaus in 1970, the Sisters of St. Martha, Charlottetown, requested that her remains be transferred to the cemetery at Mount St. Mary’s, where they now rest. The Charlottetown sisters regard her as the co-founder of their congregation.

which the sisters earned from making church vestments, from sewing or from any other source, was turned in to the university bursar. The university council still had the power to vote on the acceptance or rejection of candidates into the congregation, and to determine the institutions in which the sisters could accept work. Even with the most fatherly interest, these sisters felt frustrated and thwarted when they saw their numbers increasing, their space at St. Martha's Convent becoming limited and their requirement for a separate headquarters becoming a desperate need.

Several social and economic factors might have influenced the move for autonomy. Most of the sisters came from rural backgrounds where independence was an asset. Many of them were of Celtic ancestry. Their parents or grandparents had experienced oppression in Scotland and Ireland. In Canada they sought freedom. That spirit was passed on to their daughters. By 1915 the sisters were operating and financing two hospitals in eastern Nova Scotia and managing the domestic affairs of St. Augustine's Seminary, Toronto. Hospital expansion campaigns had quickly taught these sisters the techniques of financial management. They realized that they were capable of controlling their community finances. With the onset of World War I, the sisters, like all women of the time, had to take on many of the jobs of the men who had gone overseas. Women in general were realizing their potential and were assuming greater responsibility, which led to confidence and maturity.

The only known written evidence of a feeling of unrest and dissatisfaction with the control exercised by the university authorities in the affairs of the congregation is found in letters written by Sister Mary Faustina MacArthur, who was then in Toronto, to Dr. H.P. MacPherson, rector of the university. On April 27, 1914, Mother Faustina wrote:

There are other matters too in connection with the home affairs but it is hard to decide sometimes whether it is better to give an opinion or to keep silence, that one hardly knows what to do, which side of the house I am obliged to be most loyal to.

I feel sure that the superior is working for what she sincerely believes to be best for the community .. but our community is differently situated to any of the others, so that as our rule stands now, the community itself comes, in a certain sense, only secondary to the work we were founded for.¹³

¹³ Letter of Mother M. Faustina to Reverend H.P. MacPherson, April 27, 1914, St. F.X. Archives.

In a letter about a month later Mother Faustina said:

I'll not say anything more about the matter just now... I don't wish to antagonize the sisters down there just at the present time. Your interference in this affair will, I fear, be made capital of by a number of the community.

It grieves me more than I can tell to see and feel such an amount of opposition and misunderstanding between the two sides of the house.. .

Why don't you suggest to the Bishop to ask the community for a statement as to the objectionable Rules or Constitutions at present in force and let them suggest the changes desired.¹⁴

The objectionable rules mentioned above were those written in the constitutions that gave such a large measure of control to the university council. Clearly the sisters were objecting strenuously to this domination and control. Mother Faustina feared that if the discontent were not settled to the satisfaction of the sisters that, "the present condition of unrest will soon affect even the spirit of the younger members."¹⁵ When she was elected superior general again in 1916, she placed before Bishop Morrison the arguments for separation from the university council. By July 1917, a letter was sent to the bishop asking him if three priests of the diocese, Father Moses Coady, Father M.M. Doyle and Father C.W. MacDonald could represent the sisters at a meeting with the university authorities to be held in August. A formal agreement was drawn up on August 7, 1917, part of which is as follows:

And whereas: the said religious community having considerably increased in its membership since the time of its inception, it is now deemed to be in the best interests of both parties hereto that the said religious community, while binding itself and its members and their successors to efficiently serve the said university in all domestic duties attached thereto and usually performed by women and as long as the said university may require the services of the said religious community, the said religious community be constituted as being empowered to direct its own organization subject to the bishop of the diocese of Antigonish and his successors in office and as a religious community to receive and administer for its own use its whole income from whatever source obtained, and also to assume the responsibility in law and in equity of providing for the maintaining

¹⁴ Letter of Mother M. Faustina to Rev. H. P. MacPherson, May 31, 1914, St. F.X. Archives.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

itself and all the sister members thereof, both active and retired.¹⁶

It is a tradition in our community that the successful resolution of this problem resulted from Dr. Moses Coady's foresight and sense of justice. The achievement of autonomy did not damage the good relationship that existed and still exists between the university and the sisters. The struggle for autonomy was completed when, in 1931, the congregation was given papal status.

Another urgent need of the diocesan church was the care of orphan children and unwed mothers. The sisters responded again to the need by opening, in 1917, St. Mary's Home, Sydney, N.S., for both orphans and unwed mothers. A few years later the services were separated when the unwed mothers and their babies were cared for at the renamed Mercy Hospital, in Sydney, and the bigger children cared for in Little Flower Orphanage, Bras d'Or, N.S.

Plans for the building of a motherhouse began in 1918. Lack of funds made the carrying out of these plans difficult. An Appeal to the clergy met with a generous response. The building was completed in 1921, but at the cost of much worry, personal sacrifice and a debt of \$79,000.

The chapter of 1922 reelected Mother Stanislaus as superior general. The following year the constitutions of the community were revised to effect their conformity with the 1917 code of canon law. During Mother Stanislaus' administration two new hospitals were opened, one in Sydney, Nova Scotia, and another in Inverness, N.S. St. Martha's Hospital, Antigonish, and St. Joseph's Hospital, Glace Bay, were expanded. These activities developed women of experience who, in the following decades, contributed greatly to the well-being of our people in eastern Canada and parts of western Canada.

A most noteworthy achievement in the field of hospital organization was spearheaded by Mother M. Faustina and Mother M. Ignatius. During the winter of 1921 these two sisters had been meeting with Mother Audet of the Hotel Dieu Sisters of Campbellton, New Brunswick, to discuss common hospital problems. In May they met with Reverend C.B. Moulinier, S.J., then president of the Catholic Hospital Association of the United States to discuss the feasibility of forming an association in the Maritime Provinces to look after the interests of Catholic hospitals. From this meeting the Maritime Conference of the Catholic Hospital Association of the United States and Canada developed. Mother M. Faustina was its first president and in 1922 Mother M. Ignatius was elected president.

¹⁶ *Articles of Agreement*, August 7, 1917, Archives of Sisters of St. Martha.

The Sisters of St. Martha entered the teaching apostolate to meet the need for higher standards of education for rural youth of eastern Nova Scotia. Poorly trained teachers, low salaries, inadequate buildings and equipment, and a static curriculum disadvantaged rural children. Dr. Moses Coady, one of the founders of the Antigonish Movement, along with other members of the rural clergy, was convinced that programs of self-help would be successful only if improved standards of education were achieved by all people, especially for children. His original plan, which was later dropped, was to have the Sisters of St. Martha operate a small hospital as well as teach in the school. He believed that the two apostolates could be successfully carried out by the sisters in his native county of Inverness, Nova Scotia. Several sisters who taught before entering were available and others were sent to prepare for teaching. Dr. Coady, writing to one of the councillors, Sister M. Anthony MacPhee, said, "There may be some people who will object to your taking up teaching ... surely it is your line to take up the teaching of domestic science."¹⁷ Dr. Coady built a modern school in Margaree Forks, Inverness County, and in 1925 the Sisters of St. Martha began teaching in the public schools of Nova Scotia. In 1926 and 1928 the sisters became staff members in two other Nova Scotia public schools.

The membership of the congregation increased rapidly during the next ten to fifteen years. Efforts were made to prepare the sisters for the works of the apostolate. As early as 1902 sisters were being trained as nurses, and nursing education continued to be emphasized in the years that followed. In the middle and late 1920's sisters with academic background were enrolled in degree programs at St. F.X. University, and at Dalhousie University, Halifax, while others were receiving training in music, art and household science at universities in Canada and in the United States.

In the late 1920's and early 1930's a great social movement was beginning at St. F.X. University. In response to the economic difficulties suffered by many farmers, fishermen and mine workers in eastern Nova Scotia because of the depression, several of the professors at the university began to mobilize the people into adult education study groups. These professors, Dr. Hugh MacPherson, Dr. Moses Coady and Dr. Jimmy Tompkins, advocated self-help movements, such as co-operative marketing, co-operative buying and credit unions. In order to achieve these goals in the co-operative movement sound adult education programs were necessary. The sisters were aware of these movements from the beginning and several sisters became actively engaged in that work known as the Antigonish Movement.

¹⁷ Letter of Dr. Moses Coady to Sister M. Anthony MacPhee, August 14, 1923, Motherhouse Archives.

VENTURES IN WESTERN CANADA

While the sisters continued the original work for which they were founded at the university and at the seminary, the period from 1925 to 1937 was marked by a great expansion in to new works. These activities comprised spearheading campaigns to build and operate hospitals in eastern and western Canada, collecting money for orphanages and homes for children, entering the field of teaching in rural areas and becoming involved in social work.

These women, who previously had so little experience in finance, did not hesitate to deal with stocks, bonds, mortgages, and bank loans and to acquire the skills necessary to build and administer large institutions. This involvement into the money markets, architectural ventures, and administrative responsibilities was not without its pain and worry. The sisters' trust in God, their Orayers for His support, their confidence that they were fulfilling His will, and their dependence on Him for guidance in their undertakings instilled into the whole congregation a deep spirit of faith in God that continues to be an inspiration to us today.

The expansion of the Sisters of St. Martha into western Canada began in the late 1920's. Bishop J.T. Kidd, Bishop of Calgary, Alberta, who had known the sisters at St. Augustine's Seminary where he was formerly rector, asked Mother Ignatius in 1927 to consider buying a hospital in Lethbridge, Alberta, that was operated by a lady ready to retire. An agreement between Bishop Kidd and Mother Ignatius was drawn up in 1929 by which the sisters would take over the Van Haarlem Hospital in Lethbridge, and then would build a new hospital. This proposed building program necessitated the borrowing of money, the changing of the congregation's Act of Incorporation to extend to provinces other than Nova Scotia, the purchasing of land, the hiring of architects, and a host of other details. Six sisters formed the pioneer band in Lethbridge and, by 1930, construction of the new hospital was in progress.

About the same time, the Brett Sanatorium, located in Banff, Alberta, and operated by Dr. Harry Brett, was sold by his widow to the Sisters of St. Martha. Besides being a general hospital, it had the added attraction of hot sulphur springs for the treatment of rheumatic and arthritic diseases. The hospital became known as Mineral Springs Hospital.

The economic hardships suffered by many people during the great depression of the 1930's affected the sisters deeply. This led them to begin an unorganized form of social work. Dr. Jimmy Tompkins, a co-founder of the Antigonish Movement and pastor of the Canso-Dover parish, asked the sisters to establish a convent in Canso in order to work with the people in

setting up self-help programs. The convent was opened in 1932. The sisters were invited also to open a convent in Canmore, Alberta, that year. There, many immigrant families who had little contact with the church since coming to Canada were helped and their children taught catechism. In both these missions the pioneer sisters lived in great poverty.¹⁸

These ventures into social work emphasized the need of the congregation to have sisters trained in social work. In 1934 two sisters were sent to the University of Toronto to enroll in a degree program in social work. In the years that followed, many other sisters were trained for this work.

CONSOLIDATIONS 1940-1967

Three superiors general governed the congregation in the time of consolidation: Mother Mary Immaculata Fraser, 1937-1943; Mother Mary Ignatius Floyd, 1943-1961; Mother Paul of the Cross, 1961-1967. After World War II expansion was rapid. The number of sisters increased from 273 in 1941 to 438 in 1961. Sixteen houses were opened, teaching missions, hospitals and social centers. The first house outside Canada was opened in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1952 at the invitation of Cardinal Cushing. Its primary purpose was to be a social center from which the sisters could go to work in different parishes in the City of Boston.

In the middle of the last term of office of Mother Ignatius, the congregation had to face difficult problems. The 1955 chapter delegates elected Mother Ignatius superior general for a third successive term. This was contrary to both our constitutions and canon law, but Bishop John R. MacDonald, Bishop of Antigonish, petitioned the Holy See and received permission for the third successive term for Mother Ignatius. The postulation showed the faith and trust that the community had in Mother Ignatius, but the strain of such a prolonged time in office had its effect on her health and in 1958 she suffered a severe stroke. The circumstances interrupted the efficiency of the community administration and they created a sense of apprehension and a spirit of unrest, which was heightened by the changes of Vatican II a few years later.

Mother Ignatius, who had been superior general for a total of thirty years died in 1964. During the time in which she was in office she had guided, supported and advanced all the apostolates of the congregation, but she excelled in her understanding and promotion of hospital work. She was one

¹⁸ *History of the Sisters of St. Martha*, chapter IX, p. 23 (unpublished), by Sister May Mulvihill.

of the first organizers of the Maritime Conference of the Catholic Hospital Association of the United States and Canada in 1922, of the Maritime Hospital Association in 1929, and of the Blue Cross Plan in 1942. She served for eight years as a member of the Canadian Hospital Council. In 1957 she was appointed to the Hospital Services Planning Commission set up by the Province of Nova Scotia, the purpose of which was to draw up the blueprint for medical care in the province. Serious illness forced her to resign from this commission in 1959.

POST-SCRIPT: VATICAN II

The challenge of Vatican II required a response to unmet needs of a different kind for the Sisters of St. Martha, the need for community renewal and updating of our way of life in conformity with the proposals of the Vatican Council. Efforts to meet the challenges began during the term of office of Mother Paul of the Cross. Unrest and uncertainty marked the years from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies. Vocations decreased and the desire for renewal of both the community and the individual members became evident. By 1967 the winds of change had brought about the elimination of many outmoded customs, a revision of prayer schedules and an urgent desire to get on with the work of renewal. The general chapter of 1967 declared itself to be the beginning of a period of experimentation. The chapter set forth a fourfold mandate to be carried out by the new administration under the leadership of Sister Teresa Ryan as superior general. The tasks outlined by the chapter were:

1. to study the aim and purpose of the congregation with a view to setting community and apostolic goals,
2. to launch an all-out effort for renewal and education of the sisters with emphasis on spiritual renewal and ongoing formation of persons and to develop a retirement program,
3. a careful selection and preparation of the sisters for their apostolic service and training for leadership,
4. to reevaluate, with the help of management consultants, every aspect of the congregation; lifestyle, government, finances, apostolates, the use of personnel resources and improvement of communications at all levels of the congregation.¹⁹

¹⁹ *History of the Sisters of St. Martha*, chapter X, p. 21 (unpublished), by Sister May Mulvihill.

An all-out effort for human development was the first attempt to fulfill the mandate. This was opportune because the sisters needed a variety of personal experiences before too many organizational changes were begun. The quality of communications was improved so that the sisters felt freer to discuss matters openly among themselves. The houses were more frequently visited by the superior general and the members of her council.

Some new governmental structures were adopted, the local houses were given greater autonomy, and the local superior with the sisters assumed many responsibilities that had previously been the jurisdiction of the general administration. Policy-making and long-range planning still remained the work of the general council, but the day to day management operations of the houses were coordinated by an executive group – apostolic directors. Good work was done at this time with intensive study on behalf of the whole congregation into our charism, the spirit of our founders and the theology of the apostolate. A formation program was developed and a method for evaluating our apostolic services was adopted.

With the examination of and reflection on our lifestyle, some sisters made the choice to leave the congregation. The number of sisters decreased from 438 in 1961 to 326 in 1981. Several sisters asked for transfers to different apostolates which necessitated withdrawal from some services and frequent changes in staff in many works.

Since 1970 new forms of ministry have been taken on in an attempt to meet the needs of God's people. Many sisters are now engaged in social work in hospitals, pastoral care in hospitals, parish ministry, religious education for adults and children, and spiritual direction of sisters and laity.

It is difficult to predict what will be the scope and the extent of these ministries in the future. It would appear that the needs of people in a society of high technology will center around ministries that take into account their spiritual needs. As Sisters of St. Martha we trust that God will give us the insight to recognize these needs and the courage to meet them in the best way we can. An article written on the history of the Sisters of St. Martha in 1977 states,

It is evident that the Sisters of St. Martha share in their official founder's gift of social awareness. From this their apostolate has sprung, as they have flexibly through the decades extended themselves to meet the needs of the times. The true spirit is captured in the first sisters who prepared the way through their special dedication. They were, first of all, women of faith as was St. Martha. It was through this faith that they were able to let the lacking of necessities rest in the hands of Providence. It was their faith which allowed their vision to be broad enough to embrace the varied needs of human misery. Today their founding spirit lives on and once again the

present sisters reach out in deep faith to an unknown Future.²⁰

STATISTICS - SISTERS OF SAINT MARTHA

<i>Number of Sisters</i>	<i>Number of Houses</i> (including Motherhouse)	
1900- 15	1901 - 1	
1941 -273	1941 - 20	
1961 -438	1961 - 36	
1981 -326	1981 - 30	

Apostolic Works	No. of Houses	
	1900-1978	1984
Household Management	8	2
Orphanage & care of unmarried mothers	3	1
Hospitals	11	5
Schools of Nursing	4	1
Teaching (schools - not individual houses)	26	8
Social Work agencies	12	1

New Works in which the sisters have become involved since 1970

Social work in hospitals
Pastoral care in hospitals
Parish ministry
Religious education for adults and children
Spiritual direction of sisters and laity

²⁰ *The Casket*. 125th Anniversary, 1977.

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