



## *Welcome to the Martha Storyboards Virtual Albums!*

*The Martha Storyboards present **highlights** of the Martha Story. For additional historical information, consult James Cameron, ***And Martha Served*** (2000): [And Martha Served.pdf](#)*

*The stained-glass motifs and vibrant colours of the Storyboards are inspired by the Bethany Chapel Windows [Rambusch of Canada], now located in the **Heritage Gallery**, Parkland.*

*Except when noted, historical photographs on the Storyboards have been scanned from originals in the **CSM Archives, Bethany Resource Centre**, Antigonish. Photographs on the Storyboards were edited to fit into the stained-glass designs. The original photographs, with full descriptions, are reproduced in the Storyboards Albums. [Information in square brackets added by archivist, including estimated dates.]*

*When professed, Sisters chose a **religious name**. In 1967, Marthas could retain their religious name or revert to their baptismal name and surname. The Albums identify Sisters by both their religious and secular names.*

*The **Notes** suggest additional resources that are readily accessible online – many more are available at your local library. Consult the Martha website for information on **current programs and activities**.*

# From Charity to Social Justice: The Social Work Ministry of the Marthas

Social Work is a twentieth-century profession that provides pragmatic assistance and emotional comfort to the distressed.

The Marthas initially offered social services by staffing institutions for the most vulnerable. They expanded into community development, revitalizing economically-depressed areas. They trained as professional social workers and worked in Catholic agencies, offering financial aid, programs, and counselling. By accepting systemic change as a core value, the Martha ministry has evolved from charity to social justice.



At the request of Bishop James Morrison, the Marthas agreed to operate a home in Sydney for single mothers, orphans, and neglected children. St. Mary's Home opened in July 1917.

St. Mary's Home was a difficult mission. Single mothers were often shunned, and their babies stigmatised. The Home was overcrowded, underfinanced and understaffed – only six Marthas to attend to mothers and to babies. Between 1917 and 1925, the Home admitted 601 children.



In August 1927, amid massive unemployment and bitter strikes, the Diocese opened a new orphanage, the Little Flower Institute. The initiative was supported by Catholic women's groups, labour unions, and parishes. The Bras d'Or Orphanage included a farm and ample playgrounds. The Marthas continued to run St. Mary's Home in Sydney. In 1931, an addition was built and the name was changed to the Mercy Maternity Hospital. Until its closure, St. Mary's/ Mercy sheltered 686 single mothers.



In 1935, Bishop Peter Monahan welcomed the Marthas to Saskatchewan to provide health care and social services: *"We are in dire need of labourers to take up the social work."* His priority was a shelter for unwed mothers.

The Diocese offered the Sisters a 16-room, brick residence in Regina. In June 1936, the Marthas opened Mercy Hospital and offered free, confidential services to pregnant girls, including counselling and medical care.

By late summer, the Marthas were planning a *"Catholic Welfare Agency"*, the first such bureau established by the congregation outside the Antigonish Diocese.



The intent of the Little Flower Institute was to provide a *"home-like life"* to children. The children attended school in the orphanage. The Sisters also provided lessons in art, dance, theatre, music, cooking, and sewing.

Many placements in the Institute were temporary, the children placed by desperate parents unable to cope with unemployment, addictions, or poverty. The Diocese decided to build a more spacious orphanage in Sydney, launching a fundraising campaign (*"Penny-a-Meal"*) in 1952. The new Institute opened in 1956 and operated until 1971.



## *From Charity to Social Justice: The Social Work Ministry of the Marthas*

Historically, the comfortable have often blamed the poor for their circumstances. In Nova Scotia, the government harshly treated the marginalised through its poor laws, pauper relief, and asylums. Traditionally, religious bodies responded to community need by sheltering the homeless and distributing charity.

**Social Work** is a twentieth-century profession, rooted both in denominational charities, and in secular philosophies that linked social inequities to flawed economic systems. At its best, social work provides pragmatic assistance to the poor and emotional comfort to the distressed.

The Marthas initially provided social services through **institutions** that cared for the most vulnerable. They expanded into **community development**, using traditional skills to revitalize economically-depressed areas. They trained as **professional social workers** to offer financial aid, to organize programs, and to extend counselling to families and individuals. In accepting systemic change as a core value, the Martha ministry has evolved from charity to social justice.

*Home visitation by Martha social workers, Sydney, N.S. [pub. 1948]*

## *St. Mary's Home, Sydney: Diocesan Orphanage*

At the request of Bishop James Morrison, the Marthas agreed to run a home for single mothers, orphans, and neglected children in Sydney – a daunting experiment as the Sisters had no experience in institutional childcare. However, two Marthas on staff were graduate nurses: Founders **M. Remegius MacArthur** and **M. Benjamina Beaton**.

The diocesan orphanage, [St. Mary's Home](#), opened in July 1917 in a former private home on King's Road under the administration of the Marthas. The Diocese also operated a small farm that provided meat, dairy, and produce to orphanage children and staff.



*Children resident in St. Mary's Home, Sydney, N.S. [between 1917 and 1927]*

St. Mary's Home was a difficult mission. Single mothers were often shunned by their families, parish and community, and their babies stigmatised. The Home was over-crowded. The daily number of children in residence averaged 60, although the Home's capacity was only 45. The Home was underfinanced and understaffed – only 6 Marthas to attend to frightened mothers and their babies, who required 24-hour attention. Between 1917 and 1925, the Home admitted 601 children. The Home was replaced by a new orphanage, [Little Flower Institute](#), Bras d'Or (1927).

The Marthas continued to run **St. Mary's Home** in Sydney as an institution for unmarried mothers and their infants. An addition was added in 1931 and the name was changed to [Mercy Maternity Hospital](#). Until its closure in 1951, St. Mary's Home/ Mercy Hospital sheltered 686 single mothers.



*Babies and toddlers, Nursery, Mercy Hospital, Sydney, N.S., 1947.*

## *Little Flower Institute, Bras d'Or*

In August 1927, in the midst of massive unemployment and bitter strikes on the Island, the Diocese opened a new orphanage, the [Little Flower Institute](#), Bras d'Or, Cape Breton. The initiative was supported by Catholic women's groups, labour unions, and parishes.

Located on 12 acres of land, the Orphanage included a farm and ample playgrounds. The intent of the [Little Flower Institute](#) was to provide a “*home-like life*” to 60 children who were separated into three groups. Each unit had its space, with a separate dormitory, a living and dining room, and a playroom. The orphanage farm provided sufficient produce and dairy products for children and staff.



*Little Flower Institute, Bras d'Or, Cape Breton,  
officially opened 27 August 1927.*

The children attended school in the orphanage, taught by two Marthas, both licensed teachers. The Sisters also provided lessons in art, folk dance, theatre, music, cooking, and sewing. Many placements in the Institute were temporary, the children placed by desperate parents, unable to cope with unemployment, failed marriages, addictions, or poverty.

*Children's activities, Little Flower Institute, 1947*





*Sister Mary Natalie (Shirley) Bruce and fellow Martha playing Ring-Around-the- Rosie with children,  
Little Flower Institute, Bras d'Or [1951-1952]*

# *Relocation of Little Flower Institute, Bras d'Or, to Sydney*

In 1952, Bishop MacDonald launched “*The Penny-a-Meal*” Campaign to raise monies for a new orphanage complex. The initiative was hastened by a destructive fire in March 1953 that severely damaged the residence and forced the relocation of the children to Sydney.

Three years later, a new **Little Flower Institute** opened in **Sydney**. The three-storey brick building housed dormitories, playrooms, an onsite laundry, and staff accommodations. Childcare personnel included ten Marthas and seven support workers.

In the 1960s, many social workers were aware of the problems of institutional placements, favouring options that focused on family integrity and home care. The Little Flower Institute closed in 1971.



*Official opening, Little Flower Institute, Sydney, N.S., 13 June 1956*



## *Mercy Hospital, Regina*

*“Most...girls come to us in the early stages of pregnancy to seek shelter...Very often parents...are not aware of their condition.”*

In 1935 **Bishop Peter Monahan** welcomed the Marthas to Saskatchewan to provide health care and social services. He had noted that *“from what I see of the City of Regina...I feel that we are in dire need of labourers to take up the social work.”* A priority was a shelter for unwed mothers.

The Diocese offered the Sisters a sixteen-room, brick residence. They opened **Mercy Hospital** in June 1936 and offered free, confidential services to pregnant girls, including counselling, medical care, and advice on adoption and/or parenthood.

*Mercy Hospital, Regina, Sask. [1936-1964]*

# Responding to Community Need: The Social Work Ministry of the Marthas

*"Dr. Tompkins ... was here today negotiating for the Sisters to take over some sort of social and welfare bureau in Canso." **Annals**, 14 Nov. 1932*

In response, the Marthas opened the Canso Welfare Bureau, their first venture into community social work. The Bureau served 2000 people, scattered among the struggling fishing communities of Canso, Little Dover, Queensport, and Fox Island.

The Sisters did *"anything that could be done"* to alleviate poverty and to enrich daily life. They purchased spinning wheels and looms; organized knitting groups, sewing circles, handicraft fairs, garden clubs and a lending library; taught music and promoted religious education.



In Sydney, clergy and parishioners organized the Catholic Charities and Welfare Association (CCWA) in 1935.

The CCWA mission was to alleviate the impact of the Great Depression, and to augment grudging government relief. The Marthas focussed on immediate assistance – food, money, clothing, jobs –and introduced programs that strengthened family and community.

The Marthas continued their earlier initiatives to provide compassionate care to the aged. They mortgaged their Motherhouse to finance the construction and operation of a seniors' residence in Antigonish. The R.K. MacDonald Guest House opened in 1958. The Marthas transferred ownership of the facility to Antigonish Town and County Councils (1971) but the Sisters continued as managers, staff, volunteers and board members.



Despite its intent, institutional care traumatised many children. The Antigonish Diocese closed its Mercy Hospital (1951) and the Little Flower Institute (1971). The Marthas offered other options, including temporary boarding homes, family and foster placements, adoption, and maternal support.

Initially Catholic social service agencies focussed on financial relief. In the 1950s, these bureaux were revitalised as family welfare offices. By 1960, there were 20 Marthas in nine such agencies in the Antigonish Diocese, serving 1500 families in 33 parishes.

The Marthas valued professional training; by 1970, ten Marthas had masters' degrees. They also actively participated in professional associations and engaged in policy development.



## Off to the Boston States!

The Marthas' first ministry outside Canada was the St. Martha's Catholic Center, Boston, opened in May 1952. The Archdiocese deeded the Sisters a six-story building in downtown Boston where the Marthas offered family counselling. They also organized an ambitious visitation program (*"Friendly Visitors"*) for the elderly in institutions and boarding homes.



Current social work theory and practice challenges us to question the inequities of the economy and society, to team social work and social justice.

The Martha Justice Ministry seeks *"immediate and systemic change"* through *"dialogue, contemplation and collective action."*



# Canso Welfare Bureau



**Above:** *The Marthas purchased a duplex to accommodate a convent and a welfare centre. The **Canso Welfare Bureau** operated from 1933 to 1962.*

**Right:** *Local resident transporting **Sister Maria Josepha (Assunta Sadrini) Serventi** by rowboat, possibly to Fox Island. Sr. Serventi served in Canso for one year, 1945-1946.*

*“Dr. Tompkins ... was here today negotiating for the Sisters to take over some sort of social and welfare bureau in Canso.”* **Annals** (Bethany, 14 Nov. 1932)

In response, the Marthas opened the **Canso Welfare Bureau** (Jan. 1933), their first venture into community social work. The Bureau served 2000 people, scattered among the struggling fishing communities of Canso, Little Dover, Queensport, and Fox Island.



For the past few years Canso has been acquiring for itself a reputation as a handicraft centre. On the 6th of October the Canso people publicly demonstrated their right to this reputation by staging a very fine handicraft exhibition comprising well over 200 entries.

The wholeheartedness of the enterprise was shown by the fact that men, women, and children participated to make it a success. The entries included work done by six-year-old children as well as by grandmothers. The men refused to allow all the honors to be carried off by the women, and their group, although small, showed some very fine work.

The knitted work was judged by Miss Jean Munro, Supervisor of Girls' Clubs for the Province, while Miss Marie LeBlanc, handicraft instructress of the Department of Agriculture, judged the weaving.

An interesting feature of the program consisted of demonstrations in spinning and weaving, carried on throughout the afternoon. In the evening a capacity audience listened to a program of speeches and music.

It is the ambition of the people of Canso to reach for even greater accomplishments during the next season.

**The Extension Bulletin,**  
(Antigonish) 23 Oct. 1936,

Accompanied by three Marthas, Founder **Mother M. Faustina (Mary) MacArthur** established the Canso mission. The Sisters did "*any thing that could be done ...in any way that it could be done*" to alleviate poverty and enrich daily life. They purchased spinning wheels and looms; organized knitting groups, sewing circles, handicraft fairs and garden clubs; established a lending library; taught music; and promoted religious education.



*Unidentified Martha instructing a pupil in spinning,  
Canso Welfare Bureau.*



*Unidentified Martha using table loom, Canso Welfare  
Bureau. Note the adjacent floor loom, with woven  
item displayed.*



Catholic Charities And Welfare Association (CCWA), Bentinck Street, Sydney, commonly called the *Social Welfare Centre*.

## *Catholic Charities & Welfare Association, Sydney*

In Sydney, clergy and parishioners organized the **Catholic Charities And Welfare Association (CCWA)** on 10 Nov. 1935, to serve the city of 10,000 people and its surrounding countryside. Its first social worker and field secretary was **Sister Baptista Maria (Catherine) MacDonald**, a graduate of the University of Toronto ('35), and the first professional social worker-religious in Canada. A CCWA board guided the work.

The mission of **CCWA** was to alleviate the impact of the Great Depression, and to augment grudging government relief. Often, the Martha workers focussed on immediate relief – food, money, clothing, jobs – while committed to community programs that strengthened family and community.



**“Office workers”:** *Sisters completing paperwork, Social Welfare Centre, Bentinck Street, Sydney. The photograph was published in the pamphlet, **And Martha Served** (1948), with the observation: “parish social work involves the keeping of records, the writing of letters and the many other clerical details of organization in a Catholic Charities Welfare Association.” One of the many clerical duties was printing the children’s newsletters compiled by CCWA-sponsored summer campers.*

*Back row: Sister Thomas Marie (Hattie Mary) Gallant (near window), Sister Mary Rosalia (Katherine Mary) MacNeil.*

*Front row: Sisters Joseph Helen (May) Mulvihill, Sister John Hugh (Lauretta) Robertson.*



## *Off to the Boston States: St. Martha's Catholic Center*

The Marthas' first ministry outside Canada was the [St. Martha's Catholic Center](#), Boston, opened in May 1952. The Marthas had been invited by Archbishop James Cushing to establish a mission "*of a social service nature.*"

In Boston, the Sisters were welcomed by expatriate Nova Scotians, many of whom joined the Guild of St. Martha to support their work. The Archdiocese deeded the Sisters a six-story building in downtown-Boston. The Marthas focused on family counselling. They also organized an ambitious program of visitation by young women ("*Friendly Visitors*") to the elderly in institutions and boarding homes.

**Left:** *Sister Mary Anselm (Irene) Doyle, superior, St. Martha's Catholic Centre, Boston, 1952. Sr. Doyle completed her MSW in 1956. Below:* Marthas polishing new car donated to convent by Archdiocese of Boston [ca. 1952] / David Strickler (Boston, Mass.)



# *R. K. MacDonald*

## *Guest House, Antigonish*

The Marthas mortgaged their Motherhouse to finance the construction and operation of a seniors' residence in Antigonish, the **R.K. MacDonald Guest House**. "*The RK*" opened on 18 February 1958 and welcomed 71 residents, called "*guests*".

The word "*guests*" was used deliberately. In earlier decades, elders unable to live at home were often consigned to poor asylums and public hospitals. In contrast, the residents of The RK were promised dignity and comfort. "*This building is not to be called a HOME FOR THE AGED, nor an OLD PEOPLE'S HOME, but the R.K. MacDonald Guest House.*" (Emphasis in original)



*Residents playing cards, R.K. MacDonald Guest House, Pleasant Street, Antigonish, N.S., 10 Oct. 1965. Identified: Sister Marie Cornelius (Effie Teresa) MacKinnon, Mrs. C. MacGillivray, Mrs. Christine MacKenzie, Mrs. Rod MacIntosh and Mrs. Duggan.*

The Marthas sold the **R.K. MacDonald Guest House** to Antigonish Town & County governments in 1971, although the Sisters continued as managers, directors, and volunteers.

# Consolidations and Transitions in the Martha Social Work Ministry



*Sister Marie Brenda (Ellen) Grant, Family Welfare Council Office, Antigonish [between 1956 and 1964]*

**From Institution to Family:** Despite its intent, institutional care traumatised many children. The Antigonish Diocese closed its **Mercy Hospital** (1951) and the **Little Flower Institute** (1971). The Marthas offered other options, including temporary boarding homes, family and foster placements, adoption, and maternal support.

**Family Service Agencies:** In the 1930s, Catholic social service agencies focussed on financial relief, so great was the economic distress of the Depression years. In the 1950s, these bureaus were revitalised as Family Welfare offices that offered to “*do all we can to better ... moral, social, and economic conditions*” of the family. By 1960, there were 20 Marthas in nine such agencies in the Antigonish Diocese, serving 1500 families in 33 parishes.

**Professional skills:** The Marthas valued professional training; by 1970, ten Marthas had masters’ degrees. They also actively participated in professional associations and engaged in policy development.

## *The Martha Justice Ministry*

Current social work theory and practice challenges us to question the inequities of the economy and society, to team social work and social justice.

The **MARTHA JUSTICE MINISTRY** collaborates with others for “*immediate and systemic change*” through “*dialogue, contemplation and collective action*” for the eradication of poverty, affordable housing, healthy communities, and resource stewardship.



*The Martha Ministry, St. Kitts, 2001: Miss Morton and Sr. Mary Terence (Mary) McMahon.*

## Notes



Print / Sr. Irene Doyle

**One Hundred Years of Social Work** / T. Jennissen and C. Lundy (2011) details the evolution of the profession in Canada, noting contradictions in social work between concepts of charity, practices of social control and regulation, and principles of social justice. On social work and social justice, see the Canadian Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics*, section 5: [Code of Ethics | Canadian Association of Social Workers](#)

For an early study of the Little Flower Orphanage, see Mary Somers' thesis, "*The Little Flower Institute*" (The Catholic University of America, 1933). There is an extensive historiography on institutional childcare and child welfare legislation in Canada: see, for example, Ilana Luther's dissertation, [A Study of the History of Child Protection Law and Jurisprudence in Nova Scotia.pdf](#)

For a study of maternity homes in Saskatchewan, see Laurel Halladay's thesis: [We'll See You Next Year: Maternity Homes in Southern Saskatchewan.pdf](#)

The Extension Bulletins are available online: [StFX Digital Collections Search | ANGUS L. MACDONALD LIBRARY](#)

Bishop John R. MacDoanld stressed the importance of the word "*Guest House*" during the official opening of the R.K. MacDonald; see **Sixty Years**, p. 61. On the history of seniors' institutional care in N.S., consult Cheryl DesRoches, [Poor Asylums: Finding a Place for the 'Aged' in 19th Century N.S.pdf](#)