

175 SISTER PROFILES: Beautiful Bermuda

Sisters Virginia Blend and Roberta Kerins



Sisters with *Century Plant*, Bermuda, 1908

Sisters Marie Celestia Law, Mary Flavia Donohoe, Marie Eustella Norton.

In 1608 the ship *Sea Venture*, heading to the English colony of Jamestown, encountered rough seas. The ship was taking on water and in danger of sinking. Spotting land, Bermuda, the captain deliberately crashed the *Sea Venture* on the reefs, thus bringing the first inhabitants to the



CELEBRATING

175

YEARS OF JOYFUL WITNESS

1849 - 2024

island. Short circuiting history significantly, Bermuda became a settled, wealthy part of the United Kingdom, populated principally by British citizens and the descendants of slaves.

Prior to the American Revolution, the Atlantic island of Bermuda was considered part of British North America. After the Revolution, Bermuda was grouped with the Maritime Provinces of Canada. For our purposes, that was the connection that brought the Sisters of Charity to the island.

In 1876 Archbishop Thomas-Louis Connolly from Halifax visited this outpost of his diocese. On his return he requested that Sisters be missioned there to help support



Sisters on grounds of Mount Saint Agnes Convent, Hamilton, Bermuda, photo taken after 1964

the faith. The young Congregation was not in a position to establish a new mission. However, 13 years later, the new Halifax Archbishop Cornelius O'Brien renewed the request. This time it was granted. On February 15, 1890, Mother Cleophas Connors with Sisters M. Philippa Melanson,



Pam Oatway (former member), Sisters Aileen Halleran, Roberta Kerins, Sheila Conley and Virginia Blend

M. Blanche Dunphy, Maria Agnes Precourt, and Ms. Elizabeth Archibald (a young woman from the orphanage) board the Alpha, a paddle-wheeler, to set out for Bermuda. This crew of five arrived three days later. The original accommodations were unavailable, but a large home, "Woodlands" in Hamilton, was rented for the Sisters, both as living quarters and as the school. Intent on their mission, two

weeks later, on March 3 Mt. St. Agnes was opened.

There were a number of challenges that beset this new foundation. Since most children were already in school by March, the student body was modest these early months. Over the summer most of the Sisters contracted serious cases of typhoid fever. A cable was sent to Halifax. In addition to local help,



Marie Gruebel (former member) with Sisters Carol Swan, Bitsy Minturn, Pat Wilson and Cathy Stare

Sister Mary Vincent Powers, a nurse by training, was dispatched to assist in the Sisters' care. The Sisters recovered but, still recuperating, they had to delay the opening of school for several weeks.

Even in these early days there was pushback from some locals who resented this Catholic presence on their Anglican island. Some

attempts were made to dissuade parents from registering their children with the Sisters. But, as we know from history, the rich mind-bending curriculum of music (vocal and instrumental), art, ancient and modern languages, math, rhetoric, science, as well as the 3Rs carried the day. Mt. St. Agnes Academy grew and flourished throughout its



Sister Paule Cantin, General Superior, receives Sister Cathy Stare's final vows at St. Patrick's Church in Bermuda, November 25, 1983

history, expanding from a small school in the 1890s to a well respected private K-12 academy. In 1975 the Sisters of Charity turned over the school to the Diocese of Hamilton to continue the mission of education.

In the early 1970s Bermuda was part of the New York Province, though Sisters serving there came from throughout the Congregation. Since Sisters were no longer "sent" to a mission, staffing the school with Sisters of Charity became challenging. At a New York Province meeting the Provincial, Sister Mary McGowan, asked the Sisters two questions to be answered right



Seen here volunteering in the mobile soup kitchen are the last two Sisters to serve in Bermuda, Sisters Judith and Dolores

then. "Do you support our mission in Bermuda?" "If so, when will you go?" Eyes got a little wider, but a number of Sisters did volunteer.

In the summer of 1975, five Sisters arrived on the island. Sisters Sheila Conley, Aileen Halleran and Pam Oatway (former member) would teach in the school. Sisters Virginia Blend and Roberta Kerins would establish a new ministry outside of the school. Elizabeth Seton Centre became the site of adult faith formation, spiritual opportunities, leadership preparation,

and catechist development. The six parishes on the island were served from this central place. Guest speakers and retreat directors were brought in to broaden the participants' experience. Catechists left the island for workshops. For eight years in the Sisters' homes, At Home Retreats were offered with a Sister and lay partner facilitating the gatherings. In addition to serving the people, these opportunities provided a secondary benefit, the development of lay leadership. In 1980 Ms. Carol DeSilva became the Director of the Centre, while other lay persons continued to be involved in faith formation. Several more Sisters came to Bermuda: Sisters Bitsy Minturn and Cathy Stare to work in the school; Marie Gruebel (former member), Sisters Carol Swan and Pat Wilson to do pastoral ministry.

After their retirement from Mt. St. Agnes Academy, Sisters Judith Marie Rollo (principal of the high school) and Dolores Michael Sullivan (principal of the elementary school) transitioned to serve as pastoral ministers, working untiringly as hospital visitors and leading weekly retreat days from their home.

So, the mission in Bermuda started small and finished small, but with 130 years of service and over 200 Sisters who ministered there, thousands of people who literally came from all sectors of the world, were influenced for the better. As a Congregation we have been blessed for the wise decision to say "yes" to an invitation to launch out to the deep.