



Why was this Congregation right for me?

Sr. Claire MacNeil, CSM

In my mind and heart, when I read that question it immediately flipped to “*Why was I right for this Congregation?*” The reason for that transposition of words is that it seems I have always been part of the Marthas through circumstances put into motion by our Loving Creator God.

According to the story told me by Sr. Marie Albert Shayler, one of our sisters who died only three years ago at the age of 103, I was one of “her babies”. She was in the delivery room when I was born and was the one who received me from the doctor. Every time she met me; she would ask “How’s my baby?” I was embraced by a Martha at the moment of birth. I was born in a hospital called St. Martha’s – another coincidence or “God-incidence”! I, of course, did not know all this until I was in religious life many years.

My formal education from Grade 1-11 was all provided by the Sisters of St. Martha who taught in the village where our family lived. The seed of wanting to be a Sister who was a teacher was planted when I was in elementary school. I would visualize myself as a Sister in a classroom. That vision was not too clear throughout the teenage years as I had my ups and downs with the Sisters. In spite of that, the mystery of who the Sisters were, always intrigued me. I also read about other communities and was really drawn to two of them. Then I asked myself, “*What do those Congregations have that I could not find in the Marthas?*” That led me to reflect on the qualities I admired in the Sisters of St. Martha.



One great quality was the fact that they were everywhere in the community when the people needed them and at most community celebrations as leaders or helpers. They seemed to live hospitality. The convent was almost like the Community Center: Mass during the seasons of Advent and Lent, music lessons and a library from which we could borrow books. We were always welcomed kindly as we went in and out. It would have been at the cost of their own privacy. The Sisters took part and encouraged us to participate in “Peoples’ School” on CJFX radio. Even at that time we became aware of what we called Social Action and, as high school students, studied the Papal encyclicals on Social Justice. These formative experiences drew me in a mysterious way. The Sisters were faithful and faith-filled women who loved God and by their actions showed that they loved God’s people. There was a quality of presence about them that I wanted in myself!

I did not have a long discernment process when the time came to make the choice to enter. I think the grace for that choice was given to me, and became alive and active, when I was welcomed into the world and embraced by a Sister of St. Martha. It took me eighteen years to realize and accept that yes, I was right for this Congregation, and they were right for me with the help of God’s grace, and their gracious Gospel Hospitality.



Photo credit: AE Cross, Lethbridge, AB, circa 1970