

Sister Marion Sheridan has been a Sister of St. Martha for 61 years. Although she has been gradually slowing down in the last few years, she is still immersed in many important projects moving forward the plight of the poor and underprivileged.

Sister Marion entered the Congregation in 1960 as a fully formed clinical social worker and an experienced ballet dancer and ballet teacher. Teaching ballet is how she supported herself through her master's program in Social Work. One of her social work jobs was in a Catholic orphanage and she remembers inviting orphan children to her family's modest house in Halifax, NS, for Christmas to offer them warmth and holiday spirit. Having grown in a home where one always did what one could for people who were poor, Sr. Marion has always felt deep compassion for people affected by life's adversities. Her accepting and non-prejudiced approach to other human beings allowed her to offer real help and assistance to marginalized people throughout her life. She has always felt the responsibility to try and do something, even if it meant running "where the brave dare not go"- these lyrics of 1971 song *Impossible Dream* really spoke to her.

Why would a person whose deep need to help others was being fulfilled through the social work come into Religious Life? When asked this question, she says "it's a long story" and then explains that she didn't come because of social work:

"I always had a leaning towards the idea that 'there is something more', I studied at the time of existential philosophers so there was always that angst of 'what is this all about?', 'why is there all this suffering?'"



Sister Marion Sheridan

She felt there was something else out there, beyond the ordinary life with marriage and kids, or work. She longed for deep spirituality and growing in intimacy with God and that's probably why she first applied to cloistered congregations that politely refused her, saying "you sound like you belong in an active community". Her father had pointed out various issues troubling the institution of the Catholic Church and she was not encouraged by the conservative way of life of many active orders. And then, by chance, she met the Marthas and found herself immediately at home with these earthy, pioneering women who ran hospitals, were educators, did social work, household management, and lived in a deep relationship with God. They offered a balanced approach to Religious Life that fit Sr. Marion's need for being spiritual and deepening her relationship with God through prayer and retreats, but also being out there, in the community, using her education and gifts to help others.

"The spirit of the Sisters of St. Martha is a generous love of God, a gift which leads and inspires us in all our relationships and activities" (CSM Constitutions, #4)

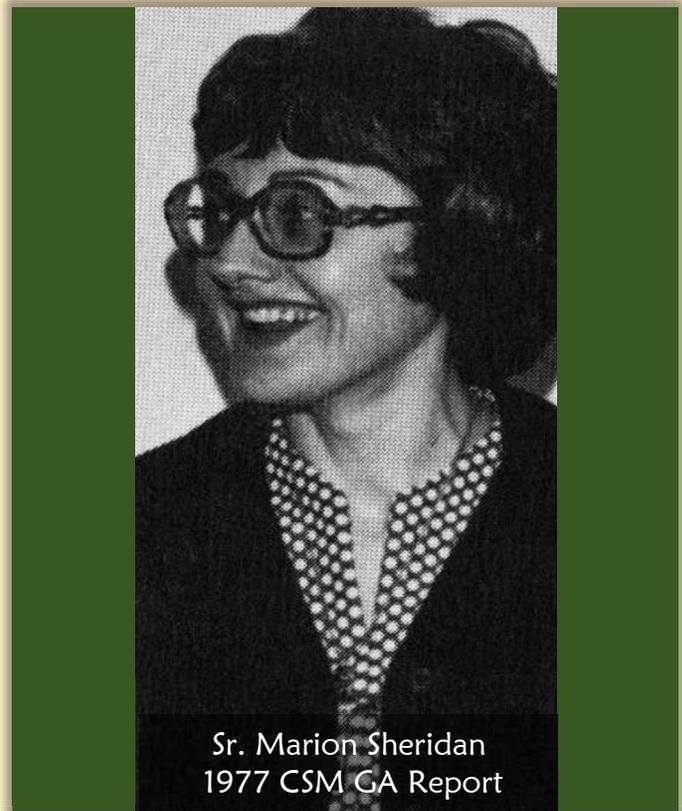
The above paragraph in the CSM Constitutions resonates profoundly with Sr. Marion and she is deeply grateful for the opportunities that the Marthas have given her. “They pulled me beyond what I thought my capacity would be”, she says. And she did a lot during the last 61 years...

She worked for 30 years in Trenton, NS, helping form Family Services of Eastern Nova Scotia and, most importantly, developing a strong connection with poor and marginalized people, “a great grace” to her. Always able to see people beyond their mental challenges, violence and precarious life situations, she stuck with them through their problems, just doing the work that was in front of her and needed to get done in order to move forward their plight. Sr. Marion also had a private practice in clinical social work.

For years, she worked with other Sisters to help them find a meaningful ministry, steering everyone’s efforts towards helping others. While working in Boston as a Martha, she taught ballet in a housing project to children of colour and Sr. Winifred MacDonald, a homemaker, taught the children cooking, a ministry that continued for 4 years.

“We work for development of persons, for the improvement of human and social conditions, with special concern for the poor, so the works and its peoples, may continue to grow in Christ”
 (CSM Constitutions, #6)

Sr. Marion’s take on it is that, in order to be helpful in the development of persons, one needs to operate on two levels: the individual and the systemic. To get anything done, one needs to form relationships with people but also address social barriers that often create the issues



Sr. Marion Sheridan
 1977 CSM GA Report

“My identity is so much in what I did, and I did a lot... I was glad to, and I never thought about it when I was doing it, just had to be done”

that deeply impact individuals. This belief in the need for systemic change has been underlying her work with different international organizations such as the UN and Sisters of Charity Federation, as well as local ones: Antigonish Affordable Housing or Antigonish Poverty Reduction Coalition, both of which she helped create. Sisters of St. Martha joined the Federation of the Sisters of Charity in 2004. The Federation has an NGO at the United Nations where each Congregation sends their NGO Liaison. Sr. Marion had already been going to the UN with another NGO group, Partnership for Global Justice, when, in 2009, she was asked to be a Federation NGO Liaison for a year. She agreed and is still there as of now, although this is her last year.

Sr. Marion has been particularly influenced in her work by the SDGs, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals set up by the United Nations in 2015 “to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all” by 2030. Upon learning these goals and their 169 targets, Sr. Marion resolved to bring them to the local level. She took the framework of the SDGs to the CSM General Council which prompted discussions, responsible decisions, new collaborations, and new relationships. The crucial message of the SDGs for Sr. Marion is “no one will be left behind” and she is currently involved in two activities that are rooted in this idea.



Sr. Marion Sheridan, CSM with Sr. Teresa Kotturan, SC, UN-NGO representative for the Sisters of Charity Federation.

One is the collaboration with Tamarack Institute, a Canadian organization focusing on solving major community issues across Canada and beyond. As members of this organization, Sr. Marion and Darlene O’Leary, Martha Justice Ministry Coordinator, are working hard at getting Atlantic provinces to cooperate in promoting guaranteed livable income for everyone through education about advocacy on this issue.

Equally important to Sr. Marion is her current ministry in Enhanced Care in Parkland Antigonish where the elder

Marthas live. As geriatric clinical therapist, Sr. Marion spends quality time with the Sisters and helps them adjust to this often-trying time when their abilities to live their lives through ministry is greatly diminished. In addition, these days, COVID-19 pandemic is having a serious impact: some Sisters are left behind, robbed of the opportunities to be involved. Repeated lockdowns mean that they cannot gather freely to discuss issues and topics brought up by the Leadership Team or Sr. Marion herself, which is a great loss to the Congregation.

She herself feels she’s getting older and starting to feel it. Although at 85, this is to be expected, it is not easy for her to admit that she needs to slow down. Having Darlene to continue ministries is giving her peace of mind. When asked what keeps her going and gives her hope, she puts her faith first, pointing out that her basic model of reference is always Jesus. Equally important is her belief in people and in change that often does come, although it may take decades. She also reveals that she is constantly looking for new things to learn:

“I think I live on the edge. I think the edge for me is there is always something new you can learn. There is no end! I think that gives me energy!”

And finally, there is music, jazz in particular, to keep her alive...



L to R: Sr. Marion, Sr. Roma DeBurtis, SCIC, and Sr. Irene Legere, NDSC