

“For God and Canada”: The Early Years of the Catholic Women’s League in Alberta

Sheila ROSS

At Calgary in April 1957 Bishop Francis Carroll addressed the Diocesan unit of the Catholic Women's League of Canada, a national organization of laywomen. His subject was Catholic Action, the pursuit of Christian perfection that includes an apostolate in which Catholics participate, coming together in thought and action around centres of doctrine and social activity, legitimately constituted and, as a result, aided and sustained by the authority of bishops.¹ Pope Pius XI defined it as “the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy.”²

Bishop Carroll remarked that Catholic Action was a “characteristic” of the Catholic Women's League, that he had witnessed their activities in the various parishes of the Calgary area and had experienced the worth of their benefactions.³ He must have smiled inwardly as he reminisced about their early years in his Diocese.

Indeed, Catholic Action had been the reason for the formation of the first Canadian unit of the Catholic Women's League in Edmonton, in 1912. Bishop Emile A. Legal sought to enlist laywomen in immigration work because distance and isolation, even climate and conditions of travel were causing Catholic settlers to drift from the authority, teaching, and sacraments of the Church. In particular, the Ruthenian peasants from the provinces of Galicia and Bukovyna in the Austro-Hungarian Empire had experienced a dearth of priests, a difference of religious rite, the difficulty of a new language, and were being proselytized by other denominations.⁴

¹ Pope Pius XI, comments printed in *The Northwest Review*, 2 May 1936; *The Western Catholic*, 21 July 1921.

² *Ibid.*

³ Francis Carroll, Bishop of Calgary, *Address to Annual Meeting, CWL Seniors*, 13 April 1957, Diocese of Calgary Archives (DCA).

⁴ Frances Swyripa, “The Ukrainians in Alberta,” *Peoples of Alberta*, eds., H. and T. Palmer (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985), pp. 214-242; George Daly, C.SS.R., *Catholic Problems in Western Canada*, (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada Ltd., 1921). Father Daly, writing of earlier years, claimed that Presbyterian and Methodist missionaries considered the Ruthenian ritual, language and tradition an obstacle to their “Canadianization” and were “tricking” the ethnic group out of the only treasure brought with them – their Catholic faith, pp. 72-93.

Bishop Legal met with journalist Katherine Hughes (1876-1925), a native of Melbourne, Prince Edward Island, who had come west via the *Montreal Star* to be associated with the *Edmonton Bulletin* as its representative in the press gallery of the Alberta legislature.⁵ Always interested in things “Catholic and apostolic,” Hughes had earlier hoped to interest Legal in a “graduate program” for women schooled by the Department of Indian Affairs. She had written, “I am anxious to have a few of the fittest trained thoroughly as nurses, and then sent back to each Reserve paid to do district nursing there.”⁶

One of Hughes' activities, at that time in Edmonton, was volunteering at a convent and orphanage managed by Ruthenian Sisters. She reported to the Bishop, “Our Ruthenian night-school and Club is going along beautifully. Sixty members, all attending regularly, English three nights a week. I teach the girls, with Mrs. Feehan and Miss Lynch as helpers.”⁷ Appointed the first provincial archivist after writing a critically acclaimed biography of Alberta missionary Albert Lacombe, O.M.I., (and of her uncle, Halifax’s Archbishop Cornelius O’Brien) she was thoroughly acquainted with the needs of the West from a Catholic point of view.⁸

In the summer of 1911, Hughes was asked by Bishop Legal to volunteer several weekends for the purpose of organizing the women of the Diocese of St. Albert into a society similar to The Catholic Association of Alberta that had been established, the year before, for laymen doing immigration work. It was quite a task as the Diocese spanned the province from the American border up to the Athabasca region. She later related:

In prompt compliance with his wishes I planned to visit the various cities. But an acute illness intervened, preventing me from fulfilling the plans that summer. The following year we resumed discussions concerning the work, and it was while the matter was again on the carpet that the Abbé Casgrain arrived in Edmonton. His admirable work for Catholic immigrants at the ports of entry was already known to us, and he speedily announced his purpose of establishing in Edmonton a centre for the care of Catholic immigrants arriving in Alberta. He agreed with me that Edmonton should provide them with a hotel, which would combine the advantages of a community house and an employment bureau, together with accommodation for the newer arrivals. We found on inquiry that financial conditions would not permit the sale of stock in such a venture at that time. That was the decision of men. Fortunately neither of us despaired, we simply turned to the women.⁹

⁵ *The Western Catholic*, 30 April 1925.

⁶ Katherine Hughes to Emile Legal, Bishop of St. Albert, 5 October 1901, Archdiocese of Edmonton Archives (ARCAE).

⁷ Hughes to Legal, 5 September 1910, ARCAE.

⁸ *The Western Catholic*, 30 April 1925.

⁹ Hughes, “Early Memories of the Catholic Women’s League of Edmonton,” *The Western Catholic*, 10 July 1924.

Abbé Casgrain was the chaplain and Secretary of the Catholic Church Extension Society, an organization active in Western missions. He suggested that the long-planned Diocesan women's organization might take the form of a Catholic Women's League, an association linked closely to Rome, the hierarchy and lay social action, spoken of in ardent terms by Francis Cardinal Bourne, the Archbishop of Westminster, at the 1910 Eucharistic Congress in Montreal.¹⁰ It could then cooperate with immigration work being done by the London League, at whose accommodation women often stayed prior to sailing, and perhaps link with Germany's *Katholischer Frauenbund* and organizations of the same name recently operating in France and Italy.¹¹

Although Bishop Legal was interested in the idea of a Catholic Women's League, to merit his support and approval, the organization would necessarily have the same requirements (of Catholic Action) as the laymen's association, The Catholic Association of Alberta. First, that of faithfulness. All aspects of their apostolate would have to be oriented by the Church's values, in fact, strictly speaking they could not have an ideology of their own. Another was the specification of control. Leadership would rest with the Bishop. The CWL would be an "auxiliary and subordinate collaboration with the hierarchy's apostolate," to be viewed as "an extension of the hierarchy's arm."¹²

Katherine Hughes organized a meeting of Catholic laywomen, through announcements in the churches, on 13 November 1912, in the parish hall of St. Joachim's in Edmonton. All existing Catholic associations within the Diocese were invited to affiliate. Her plan was to federate the societies, with a central Executive board competent to handle the larger social problems of the communities and Churches throughout the Diocese. There was assurance that her operation would in no way encroach upon the work of smaller organizations in all the parishes, some of which were represented at the inaugural meeting. As

¹⁰ Sybil St. George Saunders, Organizing Secretary, London's CWL, to Sarah Thompson 11 February 1917, ARCAE; Norah Iversen, "The Catholic Women's League," *Westminster Cathedral Garden of Prayer, Annual Report of the Catholic Women's League* (Stevenage: Saxon Press 1978), pp. 6-7. In 1906, Margaret Fletcher (1862-1943), an English convert, founded a "League of Catholic Women Workers" which became a national organization called The Catholic Women's League. A professional artist, schooled at the Royal Academy and a member of both the Catholic Truth Society and the Catholic Social Guild, she successfully interested Catholic female elites in projects aimed at improving the conditions of economically deprived classes; Paula Kane, "'The Willing Captive of Home?': The English Catholic Women's League, 1906-1920," *Church History*, Vol. 60 (1991), pp. 331-339.

¹¹ Iverson, p. 7. Already these societies had established an International Congress of Catholic Women's Leagues which accommodated women travelling from country to country.

¹² Gianfranco Poggi, *Catholic Action in Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 12. The guidelines of Catholic Action are outlined in Charles J. Callan, ed., *The Call to Catholic Action* (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, Inc., 1935).

Hughes placed the plans before the assembled women, she urged that the organization be established along the lines of the Local Council of Women "... as this would enable us to participate in a national federation later."¹³ The plan of organization was enthusiastically adopted, officers were elected and the ladies of each parish in Edmonton and Strathcona "left the meeting eager to spread the tidings and enroll every woman in their various parishes."¹⁴

Mrs. Jessie Gorman was elected The Catholic Women's League's first President; Katherine Hughes was the Secretary, Mrs. Martha Morkin the Recording Secretary, and Mrs. M. J. Tehan the Treasurer. The Executive Committee consisted of Mmes. W. Gariepy, Berube, Barry, Madore, Boucher, L. H. Lavallee, H. B. Dawson, T. P. Malone, J. Laughlin, S. Smith, J. T. Ducy, and Katharine Underwood (husband, Edward, designed the first Cathedral Church).¹⁵ Archbishop Legal, of the newly erected Edmonton archdiocese, gave his blessing to the organization by sending a \$25.00 donation and allowing a collection taken for CWL purposes at Sunday Mass in the churches in the Archdiocese.¹⁶ Membership reached 174 in 1913.¹⁷

The objectives of the League were "the promotion of the spiritual, intellectual and social welfare of its members, the dispensation of charity and special attention to the care of young girls away from their homes."¹⁸ Accordingly, definite steps were taken to care for the spring's incoming tide of immigrants. Fear that vulnerable young women would fall victim to a loss of morals because of destitution or loneliness, led volunteers to meet all trains entering the city. A home was secured on Edmonton's Jasper Avenue to provide a receiving office and a few days lodging for newcomers, mindful that it was extremely difficult at that time, if not impossible, to obtain suitable rooms.¹⁹ As the need steadily increased, an official hostel for Catholic women seeking placement was established. Known as the Girl's Home, it was in the charge of a lay matron, Miss McAllister, and became a headquarters for a free employment bureau, a novelty in the city as the fees for the private bureau were high.²⁰ Volunteers serviced the office for two months after which a grant of \$249.96 from Edmonton City Council enabled the engagement of a secretary.²¹ Funds were

¹³ Hughes, "Early Memories."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid; *The Catholic Women's League Yearbook, 1917-1918*, ARCAE.

¹⁶ Jessie Gorman to Legal, 19 April 1913, ARCAE.

¹⁷ Annette Barry, *Report to the CWL*, 1914, ARCAE.

¹⁸ Report of the CWL, 1917, ARCAE.

¹⁹ Ibid. Diana Pederson further describes Edmonton housing in "Building Today for the Womanhood of Tomorrow: Businessmen, Boosters, and the YWCA, 1890-1930," *Urban History Review*, February 1987.

²⁰ Report of the CWL, 1917.

²¹ Ibid.

raised from fees (50 cents per year from the membership of 230 in 1915), lectures, lawn socials, sales of badges and teas.²² In answer to a pointed warning, Martha Morkin assured Archbishop Legal that the League would not fundraise by consenting to lend their patronage to “the giving of any balls or dances of any kind.”²³

CWL endeavors were to be of city-wide and provincial interest, a change from the traditional Catholic charitable work that was parish-oriented, more individualistic.²⁴ Permission for projects was secured from the Archbishop rather than from parish priests.²⁵ Yet, in order to attract a larger membership and gain needed financial support for their work, the backing of the priests was necessary. Requests for a spiritual advisor from one of the Edmonton parishes were repeatedly submitted following the resignation of Father Albert Naessens, O.M.I., their first chaplain and a strong supporter of the League.²⁶ An indication of possible clerical indifference to their work can be noted in Legal’s response to a request for an annual collection in the churches in aid of the Girl’s Home. He wrote, “I may propose it again to the Episcopal Church Council, but I am afraid it will not be favorably considered.”²⁷ At one point, the League asked that a different priest be appointed as their advisor each year in order to make the League better known and received.²⁸ In her request, Annette Barry tried to solve yet another problem. “We feel that if we could have a priest with experience of the work and able to give some of his time we could make a success of the League.”²⁹

In response, Legal invited Father Alphonse Jan, O.M.I., earlier a missionary to the Ruthenian population, to assist the CWL. A fortunate appointment. On behalf of the Girl’s Home, he appealed to Edmonton Catholics in a letter read (in both English and French) at all Sunday Masses:

If a girl is alone and poorly paid, what is she to do? She has no place of amusement but the cheap picture show or the public dance hall... virtue, especially the virtue of a Catholic girl, is a matter of conscience, not of dollars

²² *CWL Reports, 1914-15*, ARCAE; “Immigration Report,” *The Catholic Women’s League of the Archdiocese of Edmonton: Year Book 1917-18*, Glenbow Archives, Calgary (GAC).

²³ Martha Morkin to Legal, 6 June 1913, ARCAE.

²⁴ Jay P. Dolan writes of a change in charitable attitude as Catholics responded to the industrial age in *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1985) pp. 321-46.

²⁵ Report: *Edmonton Senior Subdivision CWL Entertains Charter Members*, 8 October 1946, GAC.

²⁶ Hughes, “Early Memories.”

²⁷ Legal to Barry, 11 February 1915, ARCAE.

²⁸ Thompson to Legal, 17 November 1917, ARCAE.

²⁹ Barry, *Report For The Catholic Women’s League, 1914-15*, ARCAE.

and cents, but, still, when a girl is lonely, inexperienced, ill-fed, overworked and downhearted, she becomes an easy prey to false friends, and especially to oily-tongued flatterers and trained seducers.³⁰

In 1915, as the numbers of residents increased, Archbishop Legal suggested that Father Jan help the CWL engage the Sisters of Providence from Kingston to assist in the management of a larger hostel, known as Rosary Hall.³¹ In 1916, with an additional grant from City Council another house was rented, known as the Rosary Hall Annex.³² The Sisters agreed to allow a measure of freedom to the women, adapting themselves to their needs rather than “killing all the effectiveness of the work for young working girls by a rigid adherence to rules designed for nuns and convent-pupils.”³³

The following year, the CWL opened a retreat centre for Rosary Hall residents and Catholic business women “where summer holidays can be spent in a most homelike way.”³⁴ Unique to the area, Rosary Camp was situated at Lac Ste. Anne, 55 miles from Edmonton on the Canadian National Railway line, and built with donated lumber transported free of charge by the Railway.³⁵ It, too, was in the charge of the Sisters of Providence who promised women rest and comfort – bathing, fishing, canoeing, and motoring were the principal amusements. And Mass every Sunday!³⁶ Guests numbered 209 the first year enabling the camp to finance itself. The following year the demand increased and additional land was secured (\$150.00 for the lot), several more tents set up, and a telephone installed. A card-party provided funds for some second-hand boats.³⁷

Because of the War and the subsequent decline in immigration, Archbishop Legal allowed the CWL to expand its sphere of work.³⁸ Besides promoting, where possible, the extension of the League, the Central Executive encouraged parochial branches to assist systematically in collective endeavors throughout Edmonton. Workers were supplied for Tag Days with various patriotic purposes. Money was raised for the Red Cross Society, the Returned Soldiers Fund, the

³⁰ Reverend Alphonse Jan to Parishioners of the Edmonton Archdiocese, 8 January 1916, ARCAE.

³¹ Thompson to Sisters of Providence, Kingston, 30 October 1915, ARCAE.

³² *Annual Report of the Catholic Women's League for 1918*, ARCAE. Rosary Hall received grants of \$200.00 in 1917 and \$150.00 in 1918 in addition to payments for their light and water bills.

³³ Hughes to Mother Superior, Sisters of Providence, 26 January 1916, ARCAE.

³⁴ *Report: Edmonton Senior Subdivision*; “Catholic Women’s League Report,” *The Western Catholic*, 23 June 1921.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Annual Report of the CWL, 1918*, ARCAE.

³⁸ *Sixth Annual Report of the CWL, 1917*, ARCAE.

Belgian Relief Fund, the Fund for Widows and Orphans of Soldiers, and the Prisoners of War Fund. Members worked for the League in parish-based Red Cross Sewing Circles. Cakes, puddings, tobacco, and magazines were collected and sent overseas (with a rosary tucked in).³⁹

Edmonton soldiers who were known to be Catholic received Christmas boxes via the League's London headquarters and were treated to a supper after Midnight Mass and a turkey dinner on Christmas Day.⁴⁰ Chaplain Ivor Daniel wrote, "Women-folk are just about the same the world over when actuated by Catholic motives."⁴¹ On the home-front during the 1918 influenza epidemic, CWL members organized a city soup-kitchen at Sacred Heart Church, in Edmonton; nearly 80 gallons of soup was distributed to needy city residents "by small boys on bicycles."⁴²

In addition to patriotic endeavours, parochial League members formed an Auxiliary Aid to assist the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in "refuge work" with young, delinquent women. Their Welfare Committee regularly attended Women's and Juvenile Courts (through the courtesy of Presiding Magistrates) and helped in placing the women in working positions as well as seeing to the safe care of their children where possible.⁴³ At this point, Archbishop Legal asked that the CWL:

... assist and protect young ones, and especially young ladies, but in fact, all those who stand in need of assistance and protection, and to bring all Catholics under Catholic influence and in Catholic surroundings. Other activities are at work, we must bear it in mind to hamper this work or to undo it. We must look after our own, and provide for their intellectual and spiritual welfare. We must do it for motives of the highest order, not only as it is done so much at the present time, for purely humanitarian and secular purposes and advantages, but for supernatural motives and for the spiritual advantages of the Catholic souls.⁴⁴

Religious instruction was added to the English night classes that were organized along with evening entertainment for women working in cafes, stores, or as domestics in Edmonton.⁴⁵ Lectures of religious and cultural value were sponsored – one was by Katherine Hughes, visiting Edmonton while researching

³⁹ Reverend Ivor Daniel to Edmonton CWL, 28 December 1917, ARCAE.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Annual Report of the CWL, 1918.*

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Legal to CWL Members, 19 January 1918, ARCAE.

⁴⁵ *Annual Report of the CWL, 1918.*

a biography of William Van Horne. She spoke about her travels in Ireland (she was an Irish nationalist) at a benefit for the upkeep of Rosary Hall.⁴⁶

According to Katherine Hughes, it was active pressure from the Edmonton League that brought about a conference of the several other Catholic Women's Leagues across Canada, some already doing immigration work and all organized from a local point of view. She recalled that their aim was "national organization. I knew then that Edmonton's early dream of a Dominion-wide organization was at last shaping into a tangible thing."⁴⁷

CWL units had been established in Montreal in 1917, in Toronto and Ottawa in 1918, and in Halifax, Regina, and Sherbrooke in 1919.⁴⁸ Mrs. Loretta Kneil, a sister of Katherine Hughes and a former President of the Edmonton unit, at the time employed with the Women's Division of the Canadian Immigration Department in Ottawa, noted that Catholic women were not being represented, alongside other denominations in the government consultation meetings concerning the settling of post-war immigrants, because there was no appropriate national association.⁴⁹ Loretta Kneil conferred with Justice Minister C. J. Doherty, (his wife was a member of the Ottawa League) who suggested she contact Bellelle Guerin, the President of the Catholic Women's Club (sister of and official hostess for Montreal Mayor James Guerin), in Montreal. Guerin invited representatives from the Leagues together with other societies of Catholic women from various centres to meet "to consider the possibilities of federating all existing CWL organizations with a view to standardize our aims and objects that we may become a real power for good."⁵⁰

In Montreal during the week ending 19 June 1920, The Catholic Women's League of Canada was formed "to unite Catholic women in an organized body in order to secure the influence needed for promotion of Catholic Social Action, Catholic Education, and Racial Harmony within the Catholic Church in Canada."⁵¹ Their motto: For God and Canada!

⁴⁶ Thompson to Legal, 27 December 1916, ARCAE.

⁴⁷ Hughes, "Early Memories."

⁴⁸ Valerie Fall, "*Except The Lord Build The House*": *A History of Social Concern* (Winnipeg: CWL of Canada National Office, 1990), p. 6.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid; Margaret Jones to Edmonton CWL, 19 March 1920, in "The Beginnings of the League," ARCAE.

⁵¹ *The Canadian League*, 7 May 1921. One address at the founding convention was "What The CWL Can Do For The North-West," by Katherine Hughes. Another was "The Betterment of Social Action," by Loretta Kneil, *First Conference of The Catholic Women's League of Canada, Montreal, June 16, 17, 18, 1920*, ARCAE.

Once in operation and affiliated with the International Union of Catholic Women's Leagues (1921),⁵² the National Executive appealed to Catholic women across the Dominion to join the CWL:

Why? This is the age of organization. Other bodies of women have long since become organized. Shall we remain inactive, a negligible quantity in the promotion of religious and intellectual interests, social and patriotic work? However strong the voice of the individual it cannot be heard above the insistent demands of a large group held together by the ties of faith, common interests and a bond of common service. Are there not public matters which affect our homes and our families in which we should have a voice? Education, Divorce, Immigration, are all questions fraught with special dangers for the future of the country.⁵³

The women leading the Catholic Women's League were either the wives of the local business and professional community or professional, single women. Volunteerism and Catholic charitable work were their options as they gradually worked their way from the traditional female piety that emphasized personal moral behavior and individual forms of social action within the parish, to Catholic Action that involved self-development and service in civic areas, as well as in the Church.

In categorizing the view of womanhood supported by the Catholic Women's League, Paula Kane demonstrates that the term "social feminism" best describes the League's outlook because it incorporates their view of women as spiritual, self-sacrificing, and obligated to improve society.⁵⁴ Catholic women downplayed the need for any change in women's chiefly domestic role; they sought a female public role that preserved the Church's view of womanhood. In an address to CWL members, Father Thomas Burke urged that "... through the extension of their maternal instinct into every walk of life Catholic women should take an active part in all the social problems of the day."⁵⁵ He did not support, "the extreme aims pursued by some women in the attempts to improve, as they maintain, the position of their sex [this] would tend rather to lower woman and to rob her of the glory and power with which Christianity has clothed her."⁵⁶

Bellelle Guerin, the first National President of the CWL, thought that a woman should know that there is such a thing as "Catholic feminism." It should be used when brought face to face with important social problems; a woman should "look at them with clear eyes, and with sound judgement decide what is

⁵² Fall, p. 24.

⁵³ *The Canadian League*, 7 May 1921.

⁵⁴ Kane, p. 334.

⁵⁵ Very Reverend Thomas F. Burke, "Address to the Catholic Women's League," *The Montreal Daily Star*, 21 March 1922.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

best for our families and for ourselves ... it is for her to direct thought, to guard morals, and to carry her influence into the scale of justice whenever righteousness demands.”⁵⁷

League members were a minority in the field of social work in Edmonton, but still, a significant minority when joined together in Catholic Action. What they really wanted was to have a practical impact on public life. Margaret Duggan, the wife of the former mayor of Strathcona,⁵⁸ in a presidential address to the Edmonton Diocesan Council, saw opportunities afforded by the latest wave of immigrants:

The great question of immigration demands our shaping hand – we cannot leave it to be molded by others. We want an evergrowing population and we want the best procurable. Numbers without quality are an impediment to true progress which, now more than ever before, demands a moral fibre of the highest. We want not the irreligious, the immoral, the agitator or the anarchist, these all countries are willing to bestow, and these we must reject as things unworthy.⁵⁹

Her Diocesan Council’s executive included Mmes. J. J. Duggan, C. J. Duggan, J. J. Culford, G. Dynes, Misses Gertrude Sullivan, and Vivian O'Reilly – middle-class women of British origin. Although open to all Catholic women, the general membership also indicated an appeal to British women – Helen Cashman (Jessie Gorman's step-daughter), Mmes. A. Fraser, E. Wankel, D. Bard and J. Mole, among others. Mrs. L. H. Lavallee was one of the few francophone members even though St. Joachim's (Father Jan's parish) had a strong French component. In Alberta, Francophone women preferred to be members of the Ladies of St. Anne; in Quebec, to Federation Nationale St. Jean Baptiste.⁶⁰

Formerly, the remoteness of League members from each other made it nearly impossible for collective action. Nationalization meant that the CWL immigration convenors in all subdivisions across Canada could refer women to League members as they travelled, from eastern points of entry to Alberta,

⁵⁷ Bellelle Guerin, Lecture to the Catholic Women's Association, *Albany Diocesan*, 1919.

⁵⁸ The community of Strathcona was amalgamated with Edmonton in 1912.

⁵⁹ Margaret Duggan, “Address to the Diocesan Convention,” 9 September 1922, *The Western Catholic*, 12 October 1932.

⁶⁰ “Ten Years of Progress,” CWL Diocesan Convention, *The Western Catholic*, 12 October 1932; *The Western Catholic*, 10 July 1924.

through their National Directory of Catholic Boarding Homes for Women, a list of hostels, homes, and social secretaries.⁶¹

The Edmonton CWL sponsored a group of Hebridean and Irish women immigrating as “house workers.” Catherine and Christine, the daughters of Neil MacDonald, for example, were placed on a farm near St. Albert, Catherine for 20 dollars per month, Christine for 15 dollars “to start.” Flora Campbell, listed as “coming out alone,” went to Mrs. Henderson’s, in Edmonton, for 25 dollars per month, the going-rate for domestic help receiving room-and-board.⁶² Edward Mullin agreed that his daughter work on a farm near Sedgewick for “whatever the girl is worth” as she was “only fourteen years.”⁶³

In February 1925, Archbishop Henry J. O’Leary outlined the Archdiocese’s extensive plans for immigration, plans that included the Catholic Women’s League. The Catholic Emigration Society, with headquarters in London, was to recruit and examine “desirable” Catholics wanting to “migrate to the Colonies.”⁶⁴ Catholic Colonization Boards were to be created throughout the province to find employment for Catholic men with Catholic farmers. The League’s work, O’Leary instructed, would be to help the Edmonton and Calgary dioceses absorb the many women coming from the British Isles and elsewhere. He added, “There are a far greater number of single men coming in than domestics. This year the Society has placed an order for fifteen hundred single men for Alberta alone. If we do not bring in the domestics, where are they going to get wives later on?”⁶⁵

Parish priests, upon whose support the placement of women rested, were still not always in sympathy with the CWL. They resented their best workers joining an organization that would use their skills for national matters when help was needed for charitable and fundraising projects within the parishes. Archbishop O’Leary cautioned that unless the priest was backing the League, it was destined to fail:

The CWL will have the favor and the assistance of the parish priest only in so far as it proves his helpmate in parochial work. Therefore in all parochial labours it should endeavor to be his great right arm seconding his every effort and submissive in all things reasonable to his control and direction.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Catherine McCrory, “National Room Directory Report,” *The Western Catholic*, 10 July 1924; Alice Hagan, *Immigration Convenor’s Report to The Catholic Women’s League National Convention*, 1929, ARCAE.

⁶² Duggan to O’Leary, 25 May 1924, ARCAE.

⁶³ Duggan, “Report on Placements of House Workers Arriving,” 11 April 1924, ARCAE.

⁶⁴ Henry O’Leary, Archbishop of Edmonton, “Immigration,” *Presentation To The Catholic Women’s League*, Edmonton, 12 February 1925, ARCAE.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ O’Leary to Evelyn McCann, 7 April 1927, DCA.

The loyalty of women involved in immigration work was at times divided, because the Church Extension and the CWL were separate (and rival) organizations in some parishes. (O'Leary solved that particular problem by having the Extension Society report to the CWL).⁶⁷ Another serious factor was that many priests preferred a parish organization more immediately subject to themselves in the matter of money.⁶⁸

Despite a waning of interest in the rural areas (the national membership of 30,000 remained constant from 1922 to 1929),⁶⁹ the Edmonton and Calgary Diocesan Councils continued to thrive. Through *The Canadian League*, their official organ, members had been asked to view their work with immigrants in a new manner – as a responsibility of both their Canadian citizenship and sincere Catholicism:

Not patriotism alone but something even higher calls on Catholic women to be alert in hospitality and friendship, to be at the ports of entry and to follow the new families until they see them established as far as circumstances will permit where church and school are such that no link will be wanting to remind them that the universal faith to which they belong is the same in the new land as in the old and that they are ever within the warm fold of their own glorious Catholic Church.⁷⁰

Redemptorist George Daly, instrumental during the early twenties in having the League endorse the Sisters of Service, a newly formed religious order in the mission field, advised:

The teaching of correct moral principles and the inculcation of religion are essential to the making of good citizens ... there is a danger to see them lose the faith of their baptism if their initiation to Canadian life is left to others ... our combined efforts should tend to make the foreigner feel himself not a stranger, but one of the "Household of the Lord" in this land of his choice.⁷¹

CWL members were self-consciously aware of the gap that separated them from other denominations. Ecumenism was not an aspect of their milieu. Nor were they involved in areas of struggle for collective gender rights or in temperance activities as were the women of some of the other churches. As lay apostles, they stressed truth as they knew it from their faith and accepted no compromise. For example, at the request of Archbishop O'Leary, the Alberta Diocesan Councils withdrew their affiliation with the Local Council of Women

⁶⁷ Hughes, "Early Memories."

⁶⁸ O'Leary to McCann, 7 April 1927.

⁶⁹ Fall, p. 22; *The Western Catholic*, 28 June 1923.

⁷⁰ *The Canadian League*, January 1922.

⁷¹ Daly, *The Western Catholic*, 10 July 1924.

after a resolution was passed asking for Birth Prevention Clinics.⁷² In another case, Mrs. W.J. Connolly, President of the Archdiocese League, formally objected to Alberta's Sterilization Act, designed for the prevention of mental illness and defects in future generations.⁷³

Yet the apostolic action of members remained flexible and abreast of specific needs and evolving social realities. Mrs. Mabel Finn, Edmonton's immigration convenor, wrote in *The Western Catholic*:

When the immigrants from the Hebrides arrived they were visited by Mrs. Gaboury and Mrs. Dynes, who distributed fruit and other delicacies. When a child of one of the immigrants died, everything possible was done for the parents. Visits were made to one of the mothers in hospital, and a layette provided for the baby and clothing for the mother. In April Mrs. Gaboury packed twenty hampers of food for the Hebradians, which were distributed to them on their arrival What we are trying to do is create a greater interest in Catholic newcomers, to make them feel that the word "Catholic" really means Universal, that they should feel equally at home among Catholics in Canada as they would in their native land.⁷⁴

In order to give further aid to families, the League sponsored "The Comfort Corner," a column in *The Western Catholic*. Every week, readers throughout the province learned of what had been achieved by the CWL, the cases which had been attended to, and urgent appeals were made for help:

Two boys respectively eight and seven years – have had to remain away from school for want of proper clothing, and an appeal must be made in their favor. It should be possible to find some good friends willing to donate enough clothing to allow these children to attend school – every child born on Canadian soil has a claim to an education and, hence, deserves our attention.⁷⁵

Calgary's League, established in 1921 by Bishop John T. McNally, was affiliated with organizations aimed at the advancement of good citizenship among younger immigrants – the Child Welfare Council and Public Welfare Boards.⁷⁶ In 1926 the CWL opened a Rosary Hall "to provide for young ladies

⁷² O'Leary to Duggan, 31 January 1933, GAC; *The Canadian League*, November 1954.

⁷³ Reverend R. Britton to Francis Carroll, Bishop of Calgary, 18 February 1946, DCA; *The Canadian League*, November 1954.

⁷⁴ Mabel Finn, "Immigration Report," *The Western Catholic*, 10 July 1924.

⁷⁵ *The Western Catholic*, 18 May 1922.

⁷⁶ Mrs. J. Tighe, *Annual Report to the National Convention, 1929*, ARCAE; The Women's Auxiliary of the Catholic Extension Society and the Calgary Catholic Women's Association were earlier societies organized to assist in the teaching of English in night-classes at St. Mary's school in Calgary. Minutes of Women's

who have no home in the City, and whose income is too small to enable them to procure respectable living accommodation, and who at the same time will receive the protecting influence of a good Catholic Home.”⁷⁷ A loan from Calgary’s Bishop John T. Kidd enabled the purchase of a large residence for \$10,000.00 in the city-centre, near the Canadian Pacific Railway station.⁷⁸

In 1927, a Diocesan property was rented to the Calgary League and a hostel opened to provide temporary accommodation for women arriving from Great Britain and Eastern Europe.⁷⁹ It was also used as an employment agency. Placement usually began in a rural home in order to learn customs and, in some cases, language. A hostel matron, Mrs. Scott, visited the homes if it became apparent that Sunday Mass was being missed. If an employer made any women unavailable for church services they were moved elsewhere. Apparently, the arrangement met with approval; women regularly returned to Mrs. Scott in search of new employment if not satisfied with wages or placement.⁸⁰

In the manner of Rosary Hall the CWL Hostel was a lay operation. It, too, was conveniently situated near the station and offered night-classes in English to residents. Roselle Hurban volunteered as an interpreter.⁸¹ The League received a grant from the C.P.R. for every resident in the Hostel who had travelled via the railway,⁸² and was assured by Father Andrew MacDonell, the Executive Director of the Scottish Immigration Aid Society in Edmonton, that it “would be on the same footing as Government Hostels for the reception of girls.”⁸³ Although it cooperated with the Traveller’s Aid Society and received 180 women during 1928, success was limited because payment from the Immigration Department was not forthcoming. According to Mrs. MacDonald, the matron of the Hostel, Catholics from England, Scotland and Ireland were often not sent their way, rather “to a so-called government hostel, not organized by the government but by private individuals.”⁸⁴ When immigration slowed to a trickle in the early thirties, the CWL relinquished the operation of both

Auxiliary, Catholic Extension Society 1910-1916, DCA; Minutes of Calgary Catholic Women’s Association 1914-1916, DCA.

⁷⁷ Records of Rosary Hall, 1926-33, DCA.

⁷⁸ Ibid. Bishop Kidd loaned the CWL “over half” of the \$10,000.00 plus \$1,000.00 for renovations and furnishings.

⁷⁹ Hostel Report, *The Western Catholic*, 25 June 1930.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Mary B. Higgins, President of CWL, to Kidd, 4 June 1929, DCA; Kidd to Katherine Rodden, Secretary of CWL Hostel, 23 July 1929, DCA. The C.P.R. was billed \$103.38 toward the accommodation of 152 women at the CWL Hostel during April, May, and June 1929.

⁸³ Reverend Andrew MacDonell to Reverend Neville Anderson, 23 August 1928, DCA.

⁸⁴ Anderson to MacDonell, 23 August 1929, DCA.

residences and appealed to the already financially burdened Bishop J. P. Monahan for permission to fundraise in order to pay debts.⁸⁵

The issue of methods of operation used by the CWL was called into question by Bishop Monahan,⁸⁶ and a short time later, was put directly on the table by Calgary's Bishop Francis Carroll. Bishop Carroll thought their difficulties, financial and otherwise, stemmed from a faulty constitution. "The thing is upside down. The women should not be deciding what is to be done, and then telling the bishops or asking the bishops' permission to do it. The bishops should tell the women what is to be done!"⁸⁷ He criticized the National Executive of the CWL for its lack of provision in the constitution for direction and guidance by the hierarchy of Canada, "the true source of Catholic Action."⁸⁸ He thought that a national Catholic society with national objectives required the active cooperation of all the bishops who should be represented on its governing board in a way decided by the bishops.⁸⁹

Carroll also thought the League tended to over-emphasize its national character, that it leaned toward nationalizing local subdivisions by setting up national objectives, especially in money-raising matters, which did not interest the average member.⁹⁰ Another factor which bothered the Bishop was that although local units were established within parish limits, League members did not allow the parish priest an authoritative position.⁹¹

Bishop Carroll did favour the idea of a national organization of women "for guidance, direction and to represent the women."⁹² Aware that His Holiness had placed his seal of approval on the CWL,⁹³ and that it was a far-reaching organization, he thought it worth his time to "convert" the Calgary women who were "zealous" in the cause of the League.⁹⁴

Carroll explained that, in the Calgary Diocese, most women were not organized as he thought they should be. The parishes all had some sort of association - an Altar Society, a Ladies Auxiliary or a CWL subdivision, but

⁸⁵ Very Reverend Arthur Hetherington to P. Woodlock, 25 May 1932, DCA; J. P. Monahan, Bishop of Calgary, to Sister Praxedes of Providence, 23 August 1933, DCA.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Carroll to W. Duke, Archbishop of Vancouver, 25 January 1943, DCA; Carroll to Anderson, 24 February 1941, DCA.

⁸⁸ Carroll to Anderson, 8 May 1941, DCA.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Carroll to Anderson, 24 February 1941.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Carroll to Anderson, 7 December 1940, DCA.

⁹³ P. Cardinal Gasparri, Secretary of State to Pope Pius XI, to O'Leary, 12 April 1924, in *The Western Catholic*, 10 July 1924.

⁹⁴ Carroll to Anderson, 24 February 1941; Irene Hawkes to Carroll, 28 October 1941, DCA.

even better, would be a women's society that truly represented and included every Catholic women in the Diocese:

There is nothing I would like better than a women's society which truly represents and includes every Catholic woman in the diocese. And my chief reason is that these women would have a true part in Catholic Action, which the Church says must come from the Bishop. The CWL has the necessary set-up; but it will not function as long as the National Council takes it upon itself to "run" the women of the country.⁹⁵

The Bishop assured members that he was not trying to de-nationalize the League:

I am merely attempting to put the National body and its works in the correct place in properly organized Catholic Action. In fact, ultimately, the National body should be a more powerful unit than it is now for national Catholic interests. Nor am I trying to overemphasize local needs. That would be parochialism. Yet the League, as I understand it, is composed of individual women, joined to further Catholic Action locally, in the diocese and nationally. I am aiming, in a general way, at defining each of these categories, so that every Catholic woman in the country will become a League member, so that local auxiliaries, etc., can be done away with and parish priests will welcome a League division, not shun it, etc.⁹⁶

Bishop Carroll submitted his complaints in the form of a set of resolutions presented to the National Convention by the Calgary Diocesan CWL, in Winnipeg, in 1941.⁹⁷ In one section, he claimed that the League did not allow for active hierarchical cooperation and direction as outlined by Pope Pius XI in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), an essential of Catholic Action. His case in point was a \$25,000 war-effort contribution, to be presented to the federal government by the National Executive, the money to be raised throughout the country, and without consultation with the Bishops.⁹⁸ (He learned of the plan through the press):⁹⁹

Only a bishop has a right to say whether such a contribution or its amount can be raised in his diocese (Canon 691 #3 and 4). Yet the bishops were not

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Carroll to Anderson, 9 May 1941, DCA.

⁹⁷ Carroll, *Some Alleged Defects in and Complaints against the CWL Constitution and Policy*, DCA.

⁹⁸ Carroll to Anderson, 24 February 1941.

⁹⁹ Carroll to Anderson, 9 August 1940, DCA.

consulted in the matter before it was launched; and the collection, although a good work, was not a work of Catholic Action.¹⁰⁰

Another strong criticism involved the financial operations of the League. Its constitution placed funds raised within the parish setting under the sole control of the CWL Treasurer and her associates in office. This was, cautioned Carroll, contrary to Church Law: "Money collected in a parish is parish funds and should come under the direction of the pastor."¹⁰¹

In his "discussion of remedies," Carroll suggested that the CWL choose to either set itself up as a separate society or be a national society in union with the ecclesiastical organization.¹⁰² In the former, the League would have the structure of a national society, distinct from the ecclesiastical organization of Canada, directed and governed by the national unit with only secondary reference to diocesan and local needs, something after the fashion of the Knights of Columbus or the St. Vincent de Paul Society. In such a society, the various units would be wholly controlled by the national Unit, the bishops having a power to veto.

On the other hand, the League could take a form wholly in agreement with and part of the ecclesiastical structure, with parochial units, autonomous diocesan units, and a national unit, one he proposed would unite all Catholic women of the country:

It can look forward to a large increase of membership and to being truly representative of all Canadian Catholic women, but its National executive will become an inspiring agency rather than one which commands and dominates what is done locally. Nationally it will retain all the powers and rights granted it by its members – the diocesan units, for it will stand for and represent and be composed of diocesan units, thus actually channeling the power of the Catholic Womanhood of Canada. Its greatest asset will be its partnership in the life of the Church under the bishops, and therefore, in true Catholic Action. The CWL will not be a distinct society but a federation.¹⁰³

Carroll knew that he would face opposition at all levels of the organization. CWL executive positions had long attracted strong personalities, capable women who were not about to relinquish autonomy easily, especially to an indifferent clergy. Loretta Kneil, for example, had been Alberta's first Factory Inspector; Edna Bakewell, for years the President of Edmonton's Business Women's Unit, had been the Director of Women's Physical Education at the University of Alberta.¹⁰⁴ Calgary League members included Miss M. E. Brown who was a

¹⁰⁰ Carroll, *Some Alleged Defects*.

¹⁰¹ Carroll to Anderson, 24 February 1941.

¹⁰² Carroll, *Some Alleged Defects*.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *The Western Catholic*, 22 September 1923.

school nurse and active in Child Welfare work; Miss O'Roarke, the Calgary CWL Diocesan secretary was also a Provincial Probation Matron, and the Secretary of the Calgary Council on Child Welfare; Mrs. Mary A. Harvey was Judge of the Calgary Juvenile Court.¹⁰⁵

When Bishop Carroll's recommendations were considered but not implemented by the National Executive, they were taken by the Bishop to the Edmonton Archdiocese's annual Convention. A presentation (in the presence of Archbishop J. H. MacDonald) followed by a question-and-answer session, did not persuade the Edmonton women, who supported a national viewpoint, much to Carroll's chagrin.¹⁰⁶ In turn, he canvassed the Canadian Bishops.¹⁰⁷

Certainly, some of Carroll's concerns were valid. Statistics indicated that the CWL had not, by any stretch of the imagination, united all Catholic women of the country. In the larger dioceses, where there were interparochial subdivisions, it included a minority – Auxiliaries and Altar Societies counting the majority. Evelyn McCann, as National President, had earlier expressed concern because the League was not progressing as expected: "Good work has been done but we are not increasing in numbers and there is so much indifference on the part of women who should assist us."¹⁰⁸ Diocesan executives reported that in rural areas it was difficult to keep smaller subdivisions viable.¹⁰⁹ Local members had complained that national objectives were decided upon and set in motion without their agreement or participation.¹¹⁰ Although the constitution indicated that local objectives have priority over Diocesan and National objectives, such was not always the case.¹¹¹

Yet, according to Frances Lovering, the National President, in 1924, when Edmonton hosted the CWL National Convention:

It is the national effort which will develop that complete and effective organization required to make of the League that great and effective instrument which aims to be in the interest of Holy Mother Church. As the strength of the subdivision depends upon the interest of the individual member, so will the strength of the national organization depend upon the quality of the subdivision. The national viewpoint must be carried to and impressed upon every division. Every link of the chain must be strong.¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ Tighe, *Annual Report to the National Convention*.

¹⁰⁶ Carroll to Hawkes, 16 October 1941, DCA.

¹⁰⁷ Carroll to Duke, 25 January 1943.

¹⁰⁸ Evelyn McCann to O'Leary, 31 March 1926, ARCAE.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Carroll, *Some Alleged Defects*.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Frances Lovering, "Address to the Fourth Annual Convention," *The Western Catholic*, 10 June 1924.

Bishop Carroll soon realized that he was not alone in his objections. Several of the Bishops were beginning to reorganize their women's societies, an indication of serious dissatisfaction. Archbishop T. P. Monahan, in Regina after leaving Calgary, was in favor of a Diocesan Federation of Catholic women.¹¹³ Vancouver's Archbishop W. M. Duke thought the CWL would and should become a select Women's Society like the Knights of Columbus and without parish units.¹¹⁴ Bishop Carroll, still leaning toward some kind of country-wide organization, was interested in a National Council of Catholic Women.¹¹⁵

Faced with the possibility of a complete withdrawal of favour and support among the Bishops, the CWL National Executive asked each Diocesan Council to submit resolutions aimed at a revision of the constitution.¹¹⁶ Irene Hawkes, responding for the Edmonton Committee, pointed out that:

... while their activities may sometimes have left the impression that they were overemphasizing the national character of the League; that effect was due, in our opinion, to the inexperience and imprudence of a few persons, or to the desire to have a national organization of Catholic women in Canada whose influence would be effective in checking pernicious legislation and unChristian (*sic*) social practices.¹¹⁷

The League eventually decided to reorganize its constitution in agreement with the ecclesiastical structure, with the suggested parochial units, autonomous Diocesan and Provincial units, and a National unit that federated the whole society.¹¹⁸ They were now "an integral part of the Bishops' own organization."¹¹⁹ When Bishop Carroll welcomed members to the National Convention in Calgary, in 1948, he was able to say that the League had become "a vital medium of the Lay Apostolate at the disposal of the Canadian Bishops under whose direction the League had placed itself."¹²⁰

Obedience, faithfulness, availability – their task as a group dedicated to the apostolic mission of the Church called League members to a complete commitment to the social teachings of the Church. Anxious to dedicate themselves to their own perfection and to realize in practice the implications of their faith, the early members of the Catholic Women's League appear to have been content to be entrusted with the task of upholding the Church's certainty that its message is directly relevant for the treatment of society's ills. Although

¹¹³ Carroll to Anderson, 7 December 1940.

¹¹⁴ Carroll to Anderson, 24 February 1941.

¹¹⁵ Hawkes to Carroll, 28 October 1941, DCA.

¹¹⁶ Hawkes to Ann MacMaster, 8 December 1941, DCA.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Fall, pp. 52-53. The CWL membership reached 100,000 in the early fifties.

¹¹⁹ *The Canadian League*, March 1948.

¹²⁰ Carroll quoted in *The Canadian League*, June 1963.

autonomous in operation the League members were never really a challenge to Church leadership. They willingly initiated measures of social action and did not claim from the Church an amount of autonomy commensurate with the extent of their effort. All alternatives and actions were from the Church's viewpoint. They assumed that there exists an allembraicing pattern of what society ought to be like. They believed that the Church is the keeper of this pattern.