

Centenarian calls the basilica home

There has always been a deep connection between Frances Cover and St. Joseph's Basilica.

Born in Edmonton 100 years ago, Cover was baptized, and received First Communion and Confirmation at St. Joachim's Church. In those days, from 1910 until 1925, St. Joseph's Parish shared Mass times with St. Joachim's until the completion of the cathedral in 1925.

Ever since then, aside from 14 years she spent in Winnipeg, Cover has been going to the beloved downtown basilica.

"It's always been my home parish. I've always enjoyed going there. It was the centre of activity. I became so attached to it that I never wanted to change," said Cover, who celebrates her 100th birthday Oct. 27.

She didn't. For decades, Cover has been at the centre of the basilica, serving as sacristan, on the pastoral council and as the catalyst who revived a floundering council of the Catholic Women's League.



Frances Cover anchored her faith and life in St. Joseph's Basilica Chris Miller, Western Catholic Reporter

In Edmonton, Cover attended Grandin School and St. Mary's High School. She also went to Alberta College, completing a commercial program in secretarial and bookkeeping skills. At age 19, she began working as a stenographer for Great West Saddlery Company, where she advanced quickly and was transferred to Winnipeg in 1931. Her career spanned 46 years and she retired in 1975.

Retired from work, yes. But she has never fully retired from her basilica-related duties.

Cover was a founding member of the basilica's parish council in 1965. She was on the parish liturgy committee, including head sacristan from 1982 to 1993.

"During that time, she was also full-time sacristan as a volunteer, managing

all weddings, funerals, weekend liturgies and all archdiocesan Masses with the archbishop," said Marc Barylo, liturgy committee chairman. "She did a marvellous job, and only stepped aside in 1992 because of health concerns."

Sister Annata Brockman said Cover was always asked to serve as sacristan for any Catholic school convention.

SO MANY DUTIES

She was also an extraordinary eucharistic minister and lector, and was involved in

various parish and archdiocesan social justice initiatives.

Volunteering together on the basilica's pictorial directory in 2004 with Cover was Jean Bara, an active member of the basilica's Catholic Women's League (CWL).

Bara said Cover never neglected basilica responsibilities, and was always willing to help in whatever needed to be done.

A ROLE MODEL

"She is a true lady, very gracious. She is everything that I would like to be and aspire to be, but I haven't reached it yet. She is just fantastic. You can have her as a role model," said Bara.

Anytime Bara is convinced she cannot do something, she looks at Cover's accomplishments and says, "Yes, I can."

"She is an inspiration, a role model and a dear friend," said Bara.

Cover joined the CWL in 1955, and took active roles over the ensuing years, including executive secretary and council president. In 1986, there was concern that the basilica's CWL council might fold. Cover became president from 1987 to 1989 and the membership rallied around the ladies. The CWL has been a flourishing organization in the basilica ever since.

"My prayer life has always been centred around the basilica," Cover said. "I've been connected in a lot of ways to the operation of the basilica. Since I've moved here (to St. Joseph's Auxiliary Hospital) I've considered going someplace else for church, but my roots are in the basilica."

Apart from the Church, she was also involved in community projects, such as the Girl Guides and Catholic Social Services. She and other CWL volunteers contributed their time doing clerical tasks for the Sign of Hope campaign.

"She was a dependable and wonderful volunteer. As far as I am concerned, Frances has been a model Catholic," said Barylo.

Cover still has many friends, including friendships that date to the 1940s.

“Frances has friends from four generations of family, which to me is an amazing accomplishment,” said Laura Kugler, who refers to herself as a “new friend,” having known Cover for about 20 years.

A GRACIOUS SOUL

“She is always reaching out to other people. A friend of hers recently said that Frances speaks to and acknowledges everyone she meets, and I think that’s one of the greatest things I learned from this woman,” said Kugler.

Archbishop Joseph MacNeil met Cover at the basilica. He was pleased to attend her 99th birthday party last year.

“I sensed very quickly that she is a very feisty lady, she’s got a great sense of humour, and a wonderful commitment to the Church. She is a wonderful person to know,” said MacNeil.

Her overseas travels began in 1946. A highlight of her first trip to Europe was meeting Pope Pius XII. Hung on the wall of her room is a group photo taken with the pope. She is on the pope’s right side, peering over his shoulder.

Her travels include trips to South Africa, Russia, Jordan, New Zealand, Australia, Taiwan, Tahiti, Fiji, Turkey, Greece, Scandinavia, England, France, Italy, Germany, Finland, South America, Egypt and Israel. She collected spoons from the many cities she visited.

“Frances always took every opportunity that presented itself, so if she was on a tour and there was a side trip available, she was on it,” said Kugler.