

# Cree elder retires from music ministry after 60 years

A beloved voice in the Enoch parish community has been reluctantly silenced.

After 60 years in music ministry, Albert Thomas has been forced to retire after debilitating lung problems and treatment for pneumonia robbed him of his voice.

"It wasn't too bad when (the lung problems) first started, but I'd be singing for Mass and I couldn't sing a full line without taking a breath. I'd have to sit down, catch my breath again," said Thomas, an Enoch Cree Nation elder who started his music ministry singing Cree songs during Mass at Our Lady of Mercy.

"I'm 76 now, so age is catching up. I'm on oxygen, and I figured it's time I quit singing in church and stay home. That's about all I do now."

To lift his spirits, friends and family organized a celebration honouring his six decades of singing and music at the River Cree Resort and Casino on March 17. For Theresa Thomas, Albert's wife of 56 years, it's a fitting tribute.

"All the things that people are doing for him now, I'm so happy for that. They're not forgetting him in any way," said Theresa, who has often heard parishioners compliment Thomas' voice and music.

While the music ministry continues at Our Lady of Mercy Parish, it won't be the same without Thomas.

"Music is his life, and music is his gift and ministry to this parish and this community," said Father Les Kwiatkowski, the pastor at Our Lady of Mercy, who has known Thomas for six years. "All of us are sad. He developed this very unique way of singing, which will be hard to replace."

Parishioner Kelly Morin, who has known the Thomas family for years, doubts anyone can replace Thomas.

"It was a huge loss for us and I don't think we'll ever replace him, in the sense of what he's meant to the church, to the community and to the families."

Thomas began singing at Mass in 1958 when he was too old to continue as an altar server. For him, music isn't just entertainment – it's a vocation.

"I'm a Catholic and I pray to God and I sing, so why not sing to God? And I loved doing that," he said. "They say singing is like praying twice."

With a steady, warm voice that easily commanded an audience's attention, Thomas quickly became a regular fixture at community events, weddings and funerals.

"He's there. We never have to ask him to come out; he's just there for everybody," said Clara Sigurdur, adding Thomas provided the music at the funerals of her children. "People just love him, and people have so much respect for him. He's here for us."

Thomas even had a year-long stint on an Edmonton radio show in the 1960s. Until recently, he also recorded CDs and gave them to parishioners at Our Lady of Mercy.

He's a big fan of country music, especially singer Merle Haggard, although it's difficult for him to choose a favourite song. In addition to singing, Thomas plays bass guitar, banjo and mandolin and recalls teaching himself how to play the organ.

"We used to watch this organist, an elder, an old guy. I'd watch his fingers when I went to church, so that when the church was empty I'd come back and put my fingers on the organ," Thomas said.

Now that he's retired from music ministry, Thomas isn't sure what to do next. He said at his age he really can't plan for the future.

"It's hard. I want to do something, but I just can't."