

# Marian Centre ministers to our 'Christ-bearers' suffering from addiction, homelessness and poverty

Jo-Anne Paquette has spent the past couple of hours serving a meal to some of Edmonton's poorest and most vulnerable people: those suffering from addiction, homelessness, mental illness, and extreme poverty.

Nevertheless, Jo-Anne welcomes me graciously, asks how my day is going, and pours me a glass of water before I start peppering her with questions about her work at the Marian Centre.

Her presence is at once calm and joyful as she shares about her life as a member of the Marian Centre community, and how she answered God's call to a unique vocation.

"I've experienced my time serving at the Marian Centre as a refreshing time, because there's a reality in which we're all poor, we're all in need, as much in need as my brothers and sisters suffering on the street," Jo-Anne explains.

"I might not be homeless. I might not suffer from that kind of an addiction. I don't have that kind of a mental illness. But all of us are poor in God's eyes."

Edmonton's Marian Centre is a mission of Madonna House, a Catholic community based in Combermere, Ont. Madonna House's founder, Catherine Doherty, felt called by God to start a community that welcomed lay men, lay women, and priests. Members of the community make a permanent commitment to a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Jo-Anne is reflective as she remembers discerning her vocation to Madonna House. Growing up outside of Toronto with her sister and two brothers, she watched her parents quietly modelling a life of deep faith and service.

"My parents were very connected to what I would now describe as 'seeing Christ in the poor,' though they didn't use those words," she recalls. "It was just part of our upbringing."



The Pax Caritas Cross, worn by all members of Madonna House, means 'peace and love' in Latin

As she moved from a faith-filled childhood into young adulthood, Jo-Anne experienced a sense of dissatisfaction. The social justice activities she was involved in didn't bring her the fulfillment she had hoped they would provide.

At 21, Jo-Anne visited the Madonna House community in Combermere, planning to stay for a month. She never left. At first, she simply wanted to stay on longer as a guest, but she gradually came to the realization that God was calling her to become a member of the community.

"My transition to life in Madonna House felt very natural to me," she says. "Up until then, I wasn't looking for a religious vocation, but I felt very at home in Madonna House right from the beginning."

In the 25 years that have passed since then, Jo-Anne has served in Madonna House missions in Saskatchewan, Arizona, and Ontario, before being assigned to the Edmonton Marian Centre four years ago.

The community's apostolate includes operating a soup kitchen and distributing clothing to their "Brothers and Sisters Christopher," as they call those who come to the Centre for help ("Christopher" means "Christ-bearer"). The Centre's 12 community members – men, women, and priests – combine their apostolate with a family life of prayer and community.



The mural 'Christ in the Breadline' by Fritz Eichenberg, is located in Marian Centre community dining room

"It's not always easy, but I find a lot of life here. I just love serving at Marian Centre," Jo-Anne says, simply. Her voice is quiet, but her eyes reflect her joy.

"The challenge is always seeing Christ in the poor. Christ came to save the poor. The Father didn't send Christ to the well and those who had it all under control and who looked really good. It was those who had almost nothing and those who were poor and those who were in need. I think that's probably why I find it so refreshing to serve."

That refreshment seems to be contagious. The peace and joy that Jo-Anne radiates have refreshed my own spirit by the end of our visit. I realize that the Marian Centre is a place of refreshment, not only for the Brothers and Sisters Christopher, but also for the volunteers, benefactors, and friends of the community.

The members of the Marian Centre community minister to our common poverty by being Christ-bearers to us. The Centre is a place where our common poverty before God can be acknowledged. In that acknowledgement, we turn to Him who supplies all our needs.

– *Rose Derksen is a pastoral assistant at the parishes of St. Alphonsus and St. Clare in Edmonton.*