

Noticed or not, religious sisters are the hands, feet, eyes of Jesus in the world

Serena Chappell is a bit of an outlier. At 36, university-trained as a teacher, she's on a path to figuring out whether she wants to make a life-changing commitment. Chappell is discerning her call to be a religious sister.

If she does take her final vows, she will be among the youngest in her congregation in Canada.

"Teaching itself is a call to serve and it fits well into religious life," said Chappell, who is on sabbatical from her job in Calgary as she spends her novice year living and learning with the Sisters of Providence.

"God willing, I will go back to Calgary and continue teaching next year. But I go back different from how I left – my formation and foundation in the charism of our community, and just the greater knowledge and depth of knowledge as to what it means to live as religious in the world."

Generations ago, religious women in Alberta helped grow a nascent province.

They helped build schools and hospitals. They taught students and cared for the sick. They fed and clothed the poor, and comforted the lonely. Today, their numbers are shrinking – and without wearing a habit they may not be as easily identifiable in a crowd – but their commitment to reflect Christ to the world hasn't diminished.



"We look around and say 'Where are the needs?' That's our commitment," said Sister Hazel Dalton, chair of the Council of Consecrated Women in the Archdiocese of Edmonton.

They continue to visit the elderly, the sick and the lonely or volunteer with food banks and parishes.

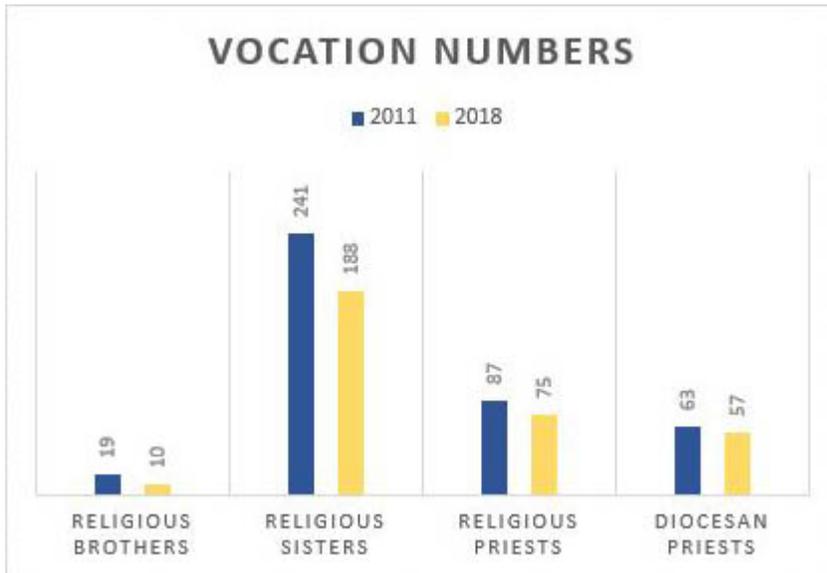
"We study Jesus, really get to know Jesus as closely as possible, and then realize that through our consecration, through our baptism really, that we become the hands and feet and eyes of Jesus in the world," Dalton said. "Sometimes the children have a little bracelet that says 'What would Jesus do?' It's that kind of thing. What would Jesus do in this situation? Can I find the spirit within me to have that same call?"

Roughly 70 men and women religious attended Mass on the World Day for Consecrated Life Feb. 2 at Corpus Christi Parish in Edmonton. Some were more visible to the congregation in their habits and cassocks, but all served as reminders of their role in Church and society. That was evident after Mass as they shared a meal, laughed and chatted with parishioners.

The World Day for Consecrated Life coincided this year with the feast of the Presentation, marking the occasion 40 days after Jesus' birth when Mary and Joseph presented him at the temple in Jerusalem.

The Mass included a renewal of the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity.

"They have dedicated their entire lives to giving witness to Christ in the midst of the Church and before the world," Archbishop Richard Smith said in his homily. "They are here because today's Feast of the Presentation is also designated by the Church as World Day of Consecrated Life. What's the connection? Well, recalling the presentation of Christ in the temple as the 'light for all nations' reminds us of the call of women and men especially consecrated to God to be a reflection of that light to the world."



Vocations within the Archdiocese of Edmonton have declined between 2011 and 2018, in line with trends across Canada.

Dalton hopes Catholics continue to see them as “witnesses of prayer and service. We’re not out like we used to be, teaching in schools, and involved like that. We’re not as visible as we used to be.”

That’s in part due to their shrinking numbers.

In the Archdiocese of Edmonton in 2011, there were 19 religious brothers, 87 religious priests (belonging to an order), 241 religious sisters, and 63 diocesan priests. In 2018, those numbers were down across the board. The number of religious brothers dropped to 10. There were 188 religious sisters, 75 religious priests, and 57 diocesan priests.

According to Vatican statistics released in 2019, there are close to 650,000 women religious worldwide – a 70,000 drop since 2010, although their numbers continue to increase in Africa and Asia.



Sr. Hazel Dalton

“I wish there were more, of course, but I think times are changing and I’m not sure what’s going to come out of this particular change in religious life, but it has happened all through history,” said Dalton, whose own congregation – the Ursuline Sisters of Jesus – has 500 sisters worldwide, nine in the Edmonton Archdiocese.

Dalton noted that the Ursulines, like many congregations, have changed. They have added associate members who are attracted to ministry by the charism, history and prayer life but don’t take vows.

“I’m very hopeful. And really, it’s God’s plan,” Dalton said. “Not in the huge numbers that there used to be, but there are women who are coming forward now, perhaps after having had a career, and willing to be involved with religious either as a consecrated woman or associated with.

“And so, somehow I think our charisms are going to continue to live.

“There have been times of huge growth and other times of poverty,” Dalton added. “And it’s what happens at that time of poverty, whether there is a regrowth in religious life or something new comes out of it. All I can say is that I know God is in charge and I’m happy with that.”

Serena Chappell notes that the laity have taken over many of the ministries once led by religious men and women, and she has seen the effects of shrinking vocations firsthand. Growing up in northern Alberta, Chappell said if young people don’t see women religious, then they don’t consider it an option.

“Our society as whole doesn’t really promote vocations anymore and I think that slow decline has also changed the number of people who know religious growing up,” Chappell said. “Priests, you see. That’s an option that’s a little more

visible.”

Born in Grand Cache, Chappell grew up in Grande Prairie. She was baptized in the Anglican Church but attended Catholic schools and was received into the Catholic Church at 14. She studied at college and the University of Saskatchewan to become a teacher.

Her career took her to Mexico, Halifax and Calgary. However, after a decade in the classroom, she said there was something missing. In Calgary, she was part of a women’s group that had close contact with the Sisters of Providence.

“I realized that something was missing in my life and that God was calling me to something more.”

Regardless of the future, Dalton said religious men and women will continue their purpose to be a reflection of Christ in the world – and young women like Chappell offer a glimpse into the future.

“It’s exciting!” Dalton said. “I do hope in God. I don’t know what the answer is, but she’s a tangible sign of the hope being fulfilled. I think that, not many, but a number of younger women are feeling that call and having the courage to respond to it. She’s kind of a witness and a pioneer in a way for those who might be thinking about it.”

-With files from Catholic News Service

This article has been updated to correct description of Chappel’s entry into the Catholic Church.