

The Summer Express

By Sister Mary Catherine Shambour

When St. Scholastica Monastery celebrates its 125 anniversary in 2017, there will be numerous tributes paid to the Benedictine Sisters for lasting contributions they have made to the city of Duluth, the Diocese of Duluth, and beyond. When one looks at the impressive list of eighty-four educational institutions, eleven hospitals, and seven other institutions founded or staffed in northern Minnesota and beyond, (Cf. *House of Stone* by Sister Mary Richard Boo) there is no wonder that Bishop James McGolrick, Duluth's first bishop, would claim, "Mother Scholastica built my Diocese!"

But beyond the institutions they founded, including those still thriving today (St. Mary's Medical Center of Essentia Health, The College of St. Scholastica, and the Benedictine Health System), perhaps their deepest legacy is their evangelization work in a far-flung, largely rural diocese. To build Catholic schools and staff them with trained religious was beyond the means of communities with small Catholic populations, or where public schools were supported by the mining industries. Thus, as the Diocese and the Benedictine community continued to grow, the Sisters provided a foundation in the faith through the schools they founded or staffed; through evening, weekend, and release-time classes for students in public schools; and through a system of year-round catechetical schools on the Iron Range that served thousands of children and adults for decades. They also created a well-organized, unique system of summer vacation schools that flourished throughout the last half of the twentieth century. Older members of the Diocese – and Sisters including myself – still fondly recall those experiences.

This annual "Summer Express" proved what could be accomplished through the cooperation of parishes and the Sisters willing to come and offer their services, even when conditions for teaching were not ideal (damp church basements during June's rainy season). Parishes provided transportation for the Sisters, lodging, and some meals. These varied from place to place but people generously shared what they had to offer.

Sometimes this meant one or two Sisters shared a bedroom in a family home (up to even three Sisters to one large bed), or stayed in an empty rectory or trailer. For my first assignment in the 1950s to Grand Portage, my companion and I were housed in the oldest church in Minnesota (built in 1865). My companion slept in the small sacristy and I slept in the bell tower. Termites kept falling on me, so I joined her in the sacristy. We had a kerosene lamp and a gas-burner hot plate for cooking, as electricity had not yet reached the site. Here also, with two days left in the session, I came down with mumps, contracted from a pupil in Grand Marais. My companion walked miles to a telephone to call Mother Martina to send a sister substitute and a car to take me to St. Mary's Hospital in Duluth, where I was quarantined for ten days. (Imagine a ten-day hospital stay today when feeling fine!)

43 Religious Vacation Schools in Session in Diocese

Benedictine Sisters Instruct Thousands In Truths of Faith

Forty-three religious vacation schools, organized by the parish priests and staffed by the Benedictine Sisters of Duluth, are now in session throughout the diocese. This is an increase of 24 since 1946, when there were only 19.

Several thousand boys and girls are receiving instruction in catechism in these schools, and being prepared for Holy Communion or Confirmation. The girls are, too, learning to sing, and are receiving instruction in the history of the United States and the life of the nation.

A year of the mission work in the city of Duluth is directed where the children do not have Catholic schools to attend. Many are conducted in homes in the city, and some in public schools. The schools are held during the summer months, and are open to all children of the city.

Many stories are told by the Sisters that reveal the mission work of the Sisters in the city of Duluth. They are told by the Sisters who are now in the city of Duluth, and by the Sisters who have been in the city of Duluth for many years.

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There are problem children in every school, and the Sisters are always ready to help them. They are always ready to help them, and they are always ready to help them.

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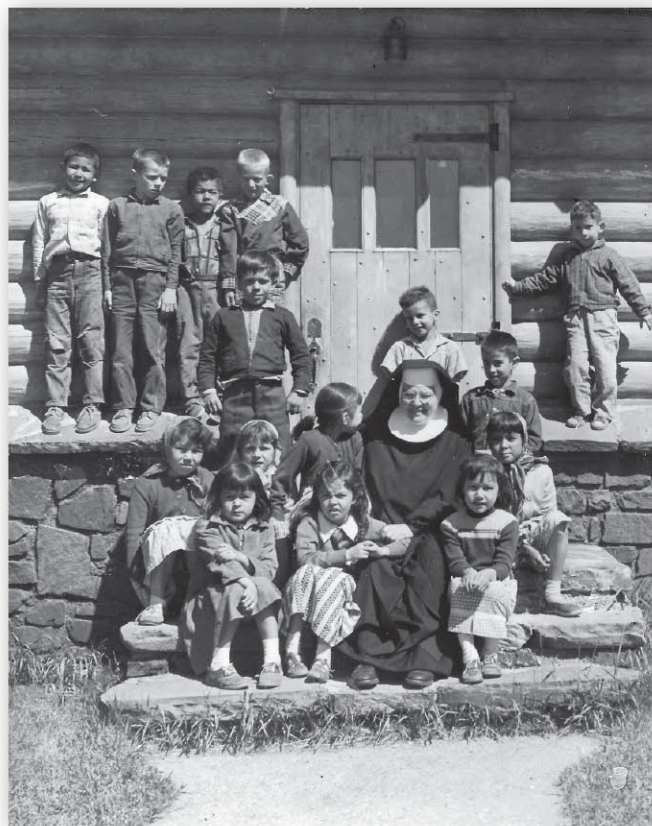
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The CCD program in Ely, Minnesota, included Sisters Andrine Kvaternik and Maxine Erchul (sitting) and Sister Marcella Cartie (standing).

Provisions for meals varied from place to place. If possible, we cooked on our own, but frequently Sisters were expected to go to a different home every day for the evening meal. On another assignment in the 1950s, Sister Ramona Ewen and I lived on the upper floor of a rectory, where the pastor who served three parishes was happy to have someone cook and share an evening meal with him. However, with empty cupboards and a total Sunday collection of twelve dollars, we had to make do with little. Once he picked up a large turtle on the highway, brought it home, and asked us to prepare it for supper. Another evening he presented us with 36 chicken gizzards he had received from a parishioner.

Teaching assignments generally included preparing children for Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation; teaching Bible stories and saints' stories; singing, directing the choir, and playing the organ; and organizing outdoor sports and indoor games. These experiences honed the Sisters' teaching skills. An excellent article from the *Duluth Register* of June 24, 1954, titled *Vacation Schools in Session in Diocese: Benedictine Sisters Instruct Thousands in Truths of the Faith*, describes how the whole enterprise was organized and received. It includes quotes from two Sisters describing their experiences: "When the children see us coming, they nearly devour us," one reported, and her companion added, "Yes, I am escorted to the door of the church by ten children each one holding a finger on my hands." Former students described how thrilled they were to receive the religious prizes awarded them for faithful attendance and accomplishment. A few thousand prizes per year were hand-made by novices at the Monastery for the summer programs. They cut religious pictures from old Christmas cards, covered them with used X-ray film that had been cleared by a lye solution, and mounted them on wood or Plaster of Paris plaques with a yarn border. Humble as the prizes were, they were cherished and unique. In one family, the children even took turns in taking to bed with them the prize one of them had received.



Sister Noemi Weygant and her class in Grand Portage, Minnesota, 1960.

The Sisters' service in the summer vacation schools continued for several decades. It reached its peak during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s when the Community's membership was close to five hundred. Between 1960 and 1969, 118 Sisters taught in summer religion programs, with 86 in the Diocese and six in other states. However, the situation changed rapidly during the late 60s and 70s, when the number of Sisters and new vocations sharply declined, and laity were encouraged to become more involved in parish religious programs. Here, too, the Sisters played a major role in the gradual transition by getting more training themselves and training future catechists at The College of St. Scholastica. Gradually summer vacation schools staffed by Sisters became a thing of the past.

While their services helped lay the groundwork for the faith, the new theology of Vatican II, which stressed that *all* the baptized – not just clergy and consecrated religious – are called to holiness, helped pass the torch of educating others in the faith to our dedicated laity today. *Ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus!* (That in all things God may be glorified.)

Photos from Monastery Archives