

Canadian Holy Cross Sister pioneered Catholic family welfare in Bangladesh

Sister Taposi Gomes, CSC

The Canadian Holy Cross Sisters made a great contribution for family welfare in Bangladesh. Sister Pauline Nadeau, CSC, a Canadian citizen, planted a strong root for nurturing families in Bangladesh. To recognize this root, one needs to look well. Though the first Bengal mission discontinued (Blessed Basil Moreau, founder of the Congregation sent first missionaries directly from France) for mostly illness and lack of members. The missionaries were sent to Bengal from Canada in 1928. The first four Canadian courageous, visionary sisters made their heroic journey to be missioned in Bengal. They arrived in Southern part of Bengal on December 21, 1928, and began to serve in dispensaries, orphanages, schools, creches, hospitals, refuges for widows and abandoned mothers and spiritual needs of people. Later they extended their service in various areas of the country mostly in Southern part of Bengal. They served in rural areas with the families. After finding the causes of poverty and suffering in people's lives, they founded primary schools, dispensaries, orphanages, sewing and catering centers for young women who were unable to receive minimum education. They also served in various parishes by teaching catechism, visiting families and so on.

Sister Pauline Nadeau has born in Canada in 1928. After joining to the Congregation in Canada, she was missioned to Bengal in 1955. She first served in various parishes in the country by visiting families and providing awareness of values in life. As her education was in psychology, she provided instruction on knowing oneself and families besides faith formation in various parishes. As time passed, she recognized a need for couples and families. Her service to families was much appreciated by Catholic Bishops of Bangladesh. They asked her to extend her family

service by joining them in Family welfare Commission and open a family counseling center in Bangladesh. With her congregation's support, she began to search possibilities to reach the needs of families. She experienced joy as well as wonderful opportunity in reaching the families. She also experienced pain in her lack of resources to support and extend families' service. In any beginning, there is difficulty. However, she trusted in God's providence and the need to support families.

Sister Pauline believed with her whole being, as scripture says;

Jesus said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND HIS MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'? So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no person is to separate." (Matthew 19:4-6)

God united man and woman to form family in human society; to continue to witness God's love for creation, and to participate in the continuation of God's creation in partnering for creation.

The importance of family ministry today is not only in Bangladesh but all throughout the world.

The Church recognizes it. We find that Holy Father, Pope Francis announced 2021-2022 a year of "*Amoris Laetitia Family*" (Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis on December 26, 2021, Feast of the Holy Family). This shows his compassion, affection, and closeness for the family which is formed by marriage; civil or religious between man and woman. Life begins in the family where it is nurtured, loved, and cared too. Family is truly a gift of God to the Church and to the world.

As Christian believers, we understand that the Church supports the ideal family which is a model of the Holy Family-where the trinitarian love relationship flows. The development of our life patterns has evolved and will continue to evolve. Our present Holy Father, Francis asks us to remain supportive and as inspiration for families. Once, the Holy Father invited couples to the

papal palace to spend quality time, to support them in any trials and hardships, so that they might continue to remain faithful and loving in their families. He said, *“The family is the fundamental locus (the place where something is situated or occurs; a center of activity, attention, or concentration) of the covenant between the Church and God’s creation”*. He teaches that marriage is a covenant - a promise to share love through giving birth to a human person, to be part of this creation of God. *A strong family that brings children up to know, love and serve the Lord is so important for the life of the Church that it is fundamental.* The family is essential to creation/world where the family brings up their children: *educates and helps them to keep going forward, to create a society of goodness, of truth and of beauty.* As Christians, we believe that *God desires to give life and grace to every human person, from the very beginning of human existence. God is a continual source of life for a man and woman united in sacramental marriage.* A Family also suffers because of *infertility, disease, tragedy, pain, sin and death. God and the family meet and give themselves to each other through suffering as well as joy.* (The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB’s), 2024)

To help families succeed in being both spiritual and vital in the world, there is a movement, *‘Worldwide Marriage Encounter’ which is the first marriage enrichment program offered, and continues to be the most popular faith-based marriage enrichment program in the world!* It was established in 1952 in Spain and later in United States, Canada, Australia and so on. It is the largest faith-based marriage enrichment organization in the world. *Worldwide Marriage Encounter programs have enriched and transformed the lives of married couples, as well as of priests for generations.* It is a *peer-to-peer experience, typically over a weekend, where married couples and priests can pause and reflect privately on the meaning of their vocations and are*

given the tools for nurturing their love. The mission of this movement is to proclaim the value of both marriage and Holy Orders in the Church and in the world. (internet)

The heroine of this movement in Bangladesh is Sister Pauline Nadeau, CSC, a sister of Holy Cross from Canada. She was a Canadian citizen who joined the Congregation of Holy Cross and was missioned to Bengal (presently Bangladesh) in 1955. Sister Pauline was enthusiastic in bringing life for family welfare in Bangladesh. She was, as Isaiah says, “*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one bringing good news, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, saying to Zion, Your God is King! Listen!*” (Isaiah 52:7-8)

The Catholic Bishops Conference of Bangladesh asked Sister Pauline *to help married couples. She conducted this apostolate at the request of parish priests and as such went to almost all the parishes of Bangladesh.* After this request she began to conduct seminars in various parishes and to set training programs for couples to share their experiences. She recognized the need to help couples to form good families in society. Among some trained couples became resources for her to move forward in forming effective couple programs for the country. After some time of research, she began her regular work for families in various locations in Bangladesh from 1979. As time passed a member of the Episcopal Family Welfare Commission, asked her to establish an office for Family Counseling. With many helping hands within Bangladesh, and from neighboring countries in southern parts of Asia, she established an office in 1987 by the name of ‘Family Service Center’ (in Bengali *cvwievwiK ‡mev †K*)^a – *cv-‡k-†K?* Who is your neighbor/who is next to you?).

As sister formed a pastoral family service center, she always stayed close with the NFP (Natural Family Planning) group which is non-profit organization directed by Caritas Bangladesh. The

director of NFP requested her to write an instruction manual. Sister encouraged others who are talented in writing. Finally, a person from the Catholic community began to write one which was subsequently published by ‘`vαúZ” Rxeḃ’– ‘Couples Life’ which is widely used throughout the whole country. Later another book was published by ‘†hŠ_ Rxe†ḃ cÖ†ek’. Both books are well accepted and still being used for marriage instruction classes throughout the whole country. These instruction books provide great lessons for family life for newly married couples.

Sister Pauline observed the International Year of Family in 1994. She conducted couples and family seminars nationally in all the dioceses which had a good impact on families and societies in Bangladesh. Sister Pauline values the families of Bangladesh. When she found that no one was ministering to families there, she recognized the need to support families. She initiated this ministry in Bangladesh to help and support families where the children would grow to love, to be educated and later be ready to form a family him/herself.

The Worldwide Marriage Encounter movement is incredibly supportive of married couples. Sister Pauline established this movement in Bangladesh around 1989 after the first seven couples and two priests from Dhaka traveled to Bombay, India for the Marriage Encounter Weekend Program. Worldwide Marriage Encounter (WWME) is an exceedingly popular movement in Bangladesh and still plays a vital role for couples of the country. Trained couples found an effective tool in renewing their commitment to love and to stay in love as married couples. Many couples were able to renew their relationship as a couple and to live their lives together. It can also be said that WWME brought transformation in many couples’ lives. They took a motto, “Avgiv fvj AvwQ, A†ḃ”ivl fvj _vK†eÓ. We are in love; others also will find love.”

Through this Worldwide Marriage Encounter weekend program, the couples identify tools to help and support their relationship. They practice being deeply in love with one another. They keep themselves enthusiastic and joyful. They are spontaneously open in sharing romance. They deeply listen to one another. They appreciate, respect, remain selfless and supporting each other. They practice forgiveness every day. They value one another. Finally, they spend time together only by themselves, etc. This weekend creates opportunities for them to reflect and write their experiences since their wedding day. They reflect their joy and their struggling in their journey. They express them in their writing what they were unable to share spontaneously. This also a special experience to forgive one another. They express openly of their hurts and if they have difficulties while they share, they receive guidance to deal with this.

Sister Pauline was committed to make World Wide Marriage Encounter movement to continual support for couples. The journey of Worldwide Marriage Encounter has been a long journey which has stays focused on couples' relationships. This has been the main reason for continuing journey in this movement. The journey of entrance for couples in the ME program begins with a forty-four-hour program where couples come and spend entire hours for participating the talk which is presented by trained and designated couples. During this program, they write their events or stories to dialogue as couples on the basis of the presenter couples and priests' guidance questionnaires and reflection. Forty-four consecutive hours provide an opportunity for couples to dialogue intimately; to express their love for each other; and to forgive one another when they have failed to love honestly. At the same time each commits him/herself to be in deep love with the one other as couple and share their love for other couples as well. They enrich themselves by having daily dialogue for 10/10 minutes, pray together and express their tenderness for each other. Others see and express, 'Look how they love each other,' This requires

an everyday decision to love. In couples' relationships, they are constantly moving from romance to disillusionment to romance.

Worldwide Marriage Encounter couples are like missionaries, who witness for love and live happily with God and with each other in the community. These couples are committed to support the parish churches by conducting couples' seminars and conferences, organizing jubilee celebrations for various ages of couples, and helping with the pre-marriage preparations as well as presenting conferences for the young students and seminarians throughout the country.

The fruit of Sister Pauline Nadeau's hard labor for family welfare of Bangladesh has made a significant impact on families throughout the country especially among the Christian families and a limited number of non-Christian families. Many couples have been able to find an opportunity to get help and/or be able to be reunited among themselves. There are many impacts, such as;

- every parish established pre-marriage instruction which is led by trained couples from the marriage encounter couple group
- Many parishes have established couple counseling programs where couples with difficult problems were able to find help and receive support for healthy family life
- Almost all parishes arrange family seminars for various ages of couples throughout the year.
- Couples has an opportunity to share their experiences with youth during the youth seminars, various conferences and World Vocation Day.
- There are continual opportunities for couples to be trained and to renew themselves.
- Couples' various jubilee celebrations; such as Silver, Golden and Diamond Jubilee.

An amazing awareness develops among the tribal groups in various diocese who believed in social marriage only, instead of sacramental marriage. Social marriage is where tribal young boys and girls make ritual commitment to live together in the witness of village leaders. This was researched and found that most of these families were unable to entertain relatives for the occasion of their wedding. It helped them to understand that sacramental marriage does not require that relatives be entertained. Among the Muslim, Hindu and other religions, marriage is not sacramental. Catholic marriages between baptized is a sacramental marriage. The Catholic group becomes aware and interested in receiving marriage preparation instruction. Social marriage is unstable and often women become victims due to having children. The sacramental marriage usually stabilizes a sense of commitment to live together as long as they are on this planet. It has taken good deal of training in order to reach this to understanding among the groups. It did not completely remove but a huge awareness has been developed. Many social marriages were rectified by providing marriage formation sessions.

The value of marriage has deepened through providing formation and other instructions that marriage is between a man and woman. God created man and woman to participate in creation through giving birth to another human person by sharing their dedicated love. The families also become part of them. The family needs to support the couple through good days and difficult ones or challenging times. The families are also becoming aware of their responsibilities. By marriage, two families come together and relate by having holiness to live in light of God, especially among interculture and interreligious spouses. In Bangladesh, the interreligious marriages have grown enormously in the past century. The idea and contribution of Sister Pauline has been vital and important in educating the husband and wife in making their Catholic marriage effective and fruitful.

Marriage Preparation instruction has been remarkably effective in reducing the attitude of man as 'boss' and women as 'house maid'. The Pre-marriage instruction book has been written in such a way that both the husband and the wife have a vital role for their family especially in the of raising children. As candidates for marriage come together to receive pre-marital instruction, each have an equal opportunity to listen and share together. This increases the value of each one's responsibilities. These include human-physical, psychological, psychosocial and spiritual aspects that men and women need to recognize before their marriage. They must learn to respect each other. It is a challenge to help them understand that men cannot be the boss in the family. Both need to work collaboratively to earn for family.

Marriage Preparation instruction is an outstanding source to guide both the couple and their entire families. Nothing needs to say that it removed by 100% but healthy mentality impact increase enormously. Both husband and wife need to work hard and try to support a better life for the family by having mutual understanding and working collaboratively. Education is important among Christian women. They go for academic education which has brought a great positive change in society. Women have become aware of their rights and responsibilities. They awe the men's group by their created force in being positive in family and society. This shows that women's leadership has increased by 100%. Sister Pauline's contribution for bringing this positive change in the family and society definitely carrying good news.

Due to this positive achievement among families and society, an awareness of gratitude among the children of the family. In many families, the children take initiative to celebrate various occasion beside celebrating birthdays. They gather and celebrate wedding anniversaries for their parents. Now almost all the parishes organize a day of Jubilee celebration for married couples. This total credit goes to the children of families who this awareness of, as well as respect and

gratitude to their parents for their dedication and faithfulness to each other and selfless contribution to the children and the rest of their families.

Sister Pauline's initiative in establishing Worldwide Marriage Encounter has enormously impacted an attitude of respect, love, support for each other as married couples who play such a vital role in their families.

It is true that Worldwide Marriage Encounter faces many different challenges these days. Well trained couples are capable of dealing with these difficult challenges and situations when they are deeply in love with one another and walk together. A good number of couples committed themselves to serve in various committees to make this movement effective and life giving for Worldwide Marriage Encounter Movement in the Church of Bangladesh. This movement helps prevent the breakdown of marriage which causes immense suffering, which could lead to arguments and hurts that are not easily healed. It also creates suffering for the children who no longer experience the togetherness of their parents these days than ever before. This movement also helps couples to forgive each other and begin to reunite with one another, to live in love of one another.

Besides about fourteen hundred couples, about fifty priests and hundreds of religious brothers and sisters have gone through this forty-four-hour program in Bangladesh to support families and the continuation of this movement in the country. Most of these are committed to standing with the leaders' couples of Worldwide Marriage Encounter in Bangladesh.

Sister Pauline Nadeau died in the retirement home of the Holy Cross Sisters' Congregation in Montreal, Canada, on August 30, 2021. She was 93 years old before journeying from this

material world to her heavenly life. She was a guiding light for the Church's family ministry in Bangladesh.

Sister Pauline Nadeau was the last Canadian Holy Cross Sister to conclude their mission in Bangladesh after eighty-one years of hard and dedicated labor. On behalf of Bangladeshi citizens and religious, I extend our deep gratitude, respect and honor to her and all the Canadian Holy Cross Sisters who served selflessly and left their footprint for us to follow. I believe that the leadership among the couples that Sister Pauline developed will continue their active service for family welfare of Bangladesh.

References

Richard Timm, *150 Years Arrival in Bengal*, published on 2003

World Wide Marriage Encounter, *Ankur*, published 2021

Interview, Gomes Markas and Florence, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Interview, Dores Robi and Rubi Philomena Rozario

Archive, Sisters of Holy Cross, Canada

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB's), 2024

Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis on December 26, 2021, Feast of the Holy Family