



Celebrating the life of
Yvonne Le Bihan - Mother Xavier – 1814-1896
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*Personal Reflections on a Life devoted to Community Service
by Karen Kirkwood-Whyte*

Yvonne Le Bihan, known in religious life as Mother Xavier, was a nineteenth century French Ursuline from Le Faouet. Like Angela Merici, she experienced the Spirit's voice calling her to a great adventure and a life of service.

I have chosen to offer my reflections on the legacy of Mother Xavier by paying tribute to some of the women who have supported and encouraged me to listen to the call of the Holy Spirit to live a life of stewardship and caring for others.

As I reflect on my life thus far, I think of the many powerful women who have influenced me – women who provided me with opportunities for life-long learning and who stood by me in times of uncertainty and ambiguity. I believe that it is no accident that God put these strong women in my path. Like Mother Xavier, who came to Chatham in 1860, I have been drawn to “hang out” with women who want to make a difference in the world. And, indeed, they already have!

I grew up in Windsor, Ontario and attended the United Church of Canada. I sang in the choir (alto!) with my father, participated in CGIT (Canadian Girls in Training) and attended Sunday School. My next door neighbour, Mary, was a wife and mother, and a woman of great faith. I babysat her four children. Mary was Roman Catholic and as someone growing up Protestant, I was curious. At my request, she taught me the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross and gave me a Missal.

As a youngster, I travelled each summer to Halifax, Nova Scotia to visit my mother's family. My mother's older sister Nan, who had graduated from Mount Saint Vincent University with a Degree in Library Science had a great influence on my life. We had wonderful conversations. I once remarked to her that I hoped I would never make a mistake. She responded with “Oh honey, I hope you make lots of mistakes, because that's the only way you'll learn and grow!” A dedicated teacher, Nan didn't have time to settle down and build a family, telling me “Marriage is for other people!”

Nan also introduced me to Sister Francis Delores Donnelly, PhD. at “The Mount” when I was ten years old. I corresponded with Sister Francis for several years while in grade school (from 1957 to 1961) and still have her letters – full of encouraging words and praise for my schoolwork and homemade crafts.

I moved to Thunder Bay in 1970 to follow my parents who had been transferred there for work. I spent nine years in this northern community and, in one of several roles, had the pleasure of working for the Director of Parks and Recreation at the City of Thunder Bay – a powerful woman who encouraged me to challenge the status quo! And I did! During this time too I joined a small group of women studying to achieve the CPS (Certified Professional Secretary) rating. And I did!

Returning to Southwestern Ontario in 1979, I accepted a volunteer position on the Board of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) while employed as a Secretary with the Kent County Board of Education. When a paid position with the CMHA was announced, I resigned from the Board to assume the position of Assistant to the Executive Director, another powerful woman who supported me in my efforts to run and secure a position on Municipal Council in the Town of Tilbury.

In 1983, I was hired by United Way of Chatham-Kent to serve as its CEO – a position I held until my retirement in 2018. One of the highlights of my almost 36 years with the organization was the establishment of the Women's Leadership Council, now called Women UNITED – an organization of remarkable women philanthropists devoted to providing a hand-up to women and children in vulnerable situations. I was proud that several Ursuline Sisters were members of this affinity group.

While serving with United Way, I was invited by the Ursulines to serve as a lay member of Angela's Pocket – a committee devoted to providing short-term loans to women struggling with life's challenges. I became friends with Sister Frances Ryan, with whom I enjoyed a special relationship, almost 60 years after my pen pal friendship with that other Sister Francis from Mount St. Vincent.

When the committee eventually disbanded, I volunteered to serve on the Ursuline Finance Committee – a position I still hold, and value. I am continually inspired by the mission and values of the Ursuline Sisters, by the depth of dedication to community, and by their commitment to engage lay members to assist in ensuring that the good work of the Ursulines lives on.

As I conclude my remarks, I'd like to salute the women in my life who, despite the moments in their own lives where they have confronted discrimination, inequality and other challenges, have chosen to mentor and support me in my efforts to fulfill my dreams. Looking back, it was those little words of encouragement and sound, objective advice that kept me moving forward. Still today, I am grateful to be part of several "communities" of women working together to achieve meaningful outcomes for others.

On this special day, let us take time to reflect on the origins of the Ursulines in Chatham and to celebrate the significant contributions of time, talent and treasure made by the Sisters in their quest to follow in the footsteps of Mother Xavier. Inspired by the Holy Spirit to seek justice and advocate for the most vulnerable, we pray for strength and empowerment to continue to reach out in compassion to all God's people and to our precious Earth. And, remembering the words of Jesus, let us all aspire to be salt and light ...

***"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?
It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.
You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.
No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel-basket,
but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house."***

(Matthew 5: 13-15)