SISTER MARITA SOUCY, C.S.J.
MISSIONARY PIONEER IN ALASKA

Editor’s Note: Sister Marita Soucy, C.S.J., recalls a moment within her first few weeks as a postulant. The postulants were given a daily scripture to read and then sent out into a courtyard to reflect. Sister Marita was observed during this time by another postulant who later complimented her by sharing how impressed she was with Sister Marita’s level of concentration and with her ability to meditate and to do it so well. Sister laughed while relaying the story, letting loose with one of her trademark, infectious giggles. She recalls, quite differently than her admirer, that she was, in fact, deeply focused on a trail of ants at her feet. The story was recounted to the Associates of the Sisters of St. Joseph, a group of about twenty women, founded in the Alaskan Missions, by Sister Marita in 1986. Sister’s point was to convey to the group how very much like everyone else she is, and yet, the Associates know just the opposite to be true.

In 1986, Sister Marita Soucy, C.S.J., arrived in Fairbanks, Alaska, to serve as a teacher in the Catholic Schools. Now in her 24th year and at the age of
nearly 79, Sister Marita will begin yet another ministry that will take her back to her beginnings and far from the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks.

Of her many ministries throughout these 24 years, none is more evident, than her ministry of kindness and laughter. St. Matthew must have had Sister Marita in mind when he penned the beatitudes, for Sister has a special regard for the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, those who hunger and thirst, those in need of mercy, those seeking peace, children, and the persecuted. She serves them all, joyfully and without judgment.

Her presence will be greatly missed but forever live on in the multitude of people she has touched with her ministry of laughter and caring. I offer you here a brief account of a life that has inspired many here in the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks.

Muriel Soucy was born on October 4, 1931, in Hartford, Connecticut, to Clifford and Blanche (Morency). Muriel, child number four of six for the Soucy’s, was born at the height of the Great Depression. Mr. Soucy, a painter by trade, had no other option than to rely on the government for subsidy to help raise his family of one boy, Leo, and five girls: Aline, Annette, Muriel, Jeanne, and Claire. Jeanne passed away at six months of age. The family lost their dear mother in 1943, when Muriel was only twelve years old. Muriel attended Catholic Elementary School in Hartford.

Muriel recalls a house filled with laughter and fun. She would not describe her parents as strict at all. She does recall one memory of her youth where she remembers “many tears.” When my two older sisters and I went to see the movie, Tom Sawyer, Aline would have been about nine, Annette, seven, and I would have been about six. We just walked to our neighborhood theatre. It was a great treat to attend the matinee. My mother and father would have given us the money, since it was during the Great Depression. Anyway, we were sitting there, and the usher was going up and down the aisles with his flashlight to lead people to their seats. It was great because if you came in after the movie had started, you did not have to grope your way to find your seat. In those days, once the movie finished, it would just start again. So, we were saying to one another that it was so good, let’s see it again! This would have been at about 4 o’clock in the afternoon. In the fall, of course, it starts to get dark early. So, my father and mother were beside themselves because we had not come home when expected. My father went to the movie theatre and spoke to the usher. Soon we heard the usher coming closer and calling out, ‘Soucy girls! Soucy girls’; saying our names. I remember having a realization of what we had done. So the three of us got up and followed the usher out. My father was standing there, a very loving man, who was never strict with

us, but there was not a smile on his face. The three of us walked home side by side as if we were going to jail. When we got home, he grabbed a strap and said, “Who shall be first?” Well we were all screaming and crying; terrified. So, he said to Aline, ‘You are the oldest, go into the bedroom.’ Annette and I were hysterical; so frightened. We never received a spanking—just a good scare. We had our lesson!

Unable to afford the cost of Catholic schooling after eighth grade Muriel attended Hartford Public High School (the second oldest High School in the United States.) The school had 2000 students, 500 to each grade. Muriel recalls, It was a wonderful, wonderful high school. Our school was run really well. We had assemblies every week where the entire student body would sing, “Home On the Range,” to our principal, Mr. Quirk, a wonderful Irish Catholic man. It was his favorite song. Picture that today. That would be unheard of. So, I had a very good high school experience. I had a good crowd I went around with. My brother and sisters were good role models, because they were great people.

Muriel, taught by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambery, felt called to join that particular order while still in elementary school. While attending high school, she began to consider the idea more seriously, and spoke to the priest and principal of the school. He asked Muriel to consider other orders as well and gave her assorted material to read. In the end, Muriel still chose the Sisters of St. Joseph. She believes that the early influence of the Sisters of St. Joseph, their goodness and kindness; their sense of sacrifice, greatly affected her. She also enjoyed teaching, especially children, and teaching and nursing, were the primary ministries of the Sisters of St. Joseph, in the United States.

Historically, until the 17th century, religious life was open only to those who brought money, goods, or land, to the religious order they wished to join. These orders lived apart from the common people.

However, in the early 1640s, a small group of women came together in LePuy, France. They felt compelled to live and work among the common people, sharing in their struggles and their hopes. A group of six women, strengthened by the belief that they had a true calling from God, sought the counsel of a Jesuit priest, Jean Pierre Medaille, S.J. Under his guidance, the first foundation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph came into being, in 1650.

In 1789, the French Revolution brought about the persecution of the Catholic Church and of religious orders of men and women in France. Many sisters went into hiding while

October 15, 2010, commemorates the end of the celebration of the Sisters of St. Joseph’s 125th Anniversary of presence & service in the United States. Above, a “27” marks the entrance to the convent at Park Road, in West Hartford, Connecticut.
others faced imprisonment and the guillotine for their beliefs.

At the end of the Revolution in 1807, the community flourished again under the leadership of Jeanne Fontbonne. More and more, generous and courageous women bonded together to serve the needs of their sisters and brothers. The order grew and branched out. One of these branches became the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambéry, founded in 1812, in the town of Chambéry, in southeastern France.

The North American Province owes its beginning to Jane Sedgwick of Stockbridge, MA — a convert to Catholicism. She desired to establish a Catholic school in Lee, MA. Since there were not enough sisters in the United States to aid in the running of the school, Jane eventually went to Rome to appeal to Pope Leo XIII to send help. In 1885, five sisters of Saint Joseph of Chambéry arrived in Lee, Massachusetts, to open the school. The foundation spread roots into Connecticut and, eventually, into other parts of the United States.

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Today, Sisters of Saint Joseph of Chambery ministries extend across the United States from coast to coast. The North American Province is one of 13 worldwide provinces that form an international Congregation of close to 2000 Sisters. The center of the Congregation is in Rome. Other Provinces and Regions are located in Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, India, Italy, Mozambique, Norway, Pakistan, Sweden, and Tanzania.

In September of 1949, Muriel, now Sister Marita, entered the order of the Sisters of St. Joseph. She was 17. There were 500 Sisters of St. Joseph in 1949; today there are only 125. At that time, in the United States, active religious began teaching immediately upon entering and sought their college degrees during the summer. Sr. Marita entered with a group of women who enrolled in college immediately, full-time.

I believe we were four different communities, of sisters of active religious who had a degree before we started teaching. That was absolutely new in the United States. And so, we were together, my group, with whom I entered—for about five, almost six years. We became so close, because we were all the same age, except two. One was from Ireland; she was like 26 or 27. We thought she was an old woman! And the other had been a chemist before she came. The rest of us were college age and we were always getting into trouble, always, always.

Sister Marita earned a bachelor’s degree in education and later a master’s degree in French, which she used while serving as a teacher, for many years in Catholic elementary and high schools. From 1949 to 1986, Sister Marita served as teacher, principal, and administrator within the schools of New England. Her “adventures” consisted of three summers in Appalachia teaching Bible School in the “hollers” of Kentucky, and, along with three other Sisters, establishing a Day Care Center. In 1974, upon the occasion of her 25th Jubilee, Sister Marita came to Alaska to visit with her sister Claire Desrocher. Sister Marita remembers, “It was my first exposure to Alaska and I simply fell in love with it.” Looking back, Sister says, I am firmly convinced that I owe my presence in Alaska ultimately and solely to the guidance of Divine Providence. At the time, however, more down-to-earth, more human considerations, seemed to be motivating factors. My blood sister, Claire, along with her husband and three boys, had moved to Fairbanks, about 12 years previously. She kept urging me, her “big” sister, to come and see the many wonders of the Lord with which Alaska is so blessed. She
also assured me that teaching positions in the local Catholic schools and in “bush” schools were to be had, and urged me to investigate. Given the green light by my Provincial Superior, I investigated. I contacted Sister Eileen Brown, S.N.J.M.—superintendent of Catholic Schools, at the time. She persuaded me to come to Fairbanks, where I could check out the possibility of teaching in some Native village. While doing so, I and the two other Sisters would be more than welcome to fill the three openings in Fairbanks’ Immaculate Conception Grade School. We accepted the teaching positions.

Sister Marita, at age 53, along with Sisters Michele Kaelin and Ann Sabol, boarded a plane in Connecticut on a sweltering, humid August day and twelve hours later they landed in a much cooler Fairbanks, Alaska, in 1986.

She spent the first three years in Alaska teaching in the middle grades and in Monroe Catholic High School. During those three years, with Claire’s assistance, she was able to make plane trips to various Native villages to see if she might be called to teach in one of them. Although I found the Indian culture very appealing, I found outhouses, chopping and hauling wood, “packing” water, and the like a bit more than my age and stamina could cope with. Fairbanks was to continue to be it for me!

Following those three years, she became principal of Immaculate Conception. She recalls those four years of ministry to the students and parents to be a total joy. As principal, I would stand in the corridor before school began and, as children passed me, I would give them a hug and a few words of encouragement. Some of them had spent as much as an hour and a half in a bus or car getting to school. And this in the dark cold of an Alaskan winter! I soon discovered, however, that the Alaskan students are extremely hardy and resilient. Even at minus 20, recess was still a go.

As Sister Marita’s seventh year at the school was coming to an end, she heard the call to go to yet another corner of the Lord’s vineyard. After consulting with Michael J. Kaniecki, S.J., Bishop of Fairbanks, she retired from the academic world to undertake a new challenge, that of ministering to the elderly, the sick, the dying, and the imprisoned. While investigating the needs for pastoral ministry in the Fairbanks hospital and prison, she became aware of the vast need for such a ministry. She was given a letter of introduction by Bishop Kaniecki indicating that her work was not to be limited to just these two places. Before long, Sister was ministering within Denali Center—a long-term care facility—and to the Pioneer Home—a residential, nursing home for seniors. She also visited Golden Towers—an apartment complex for seniors—as well as people in Assisted Living facilities. Additionally, she made visits to shut-ins, to the sick, and to the terminally ill, all within their homes. Sister Marita soon found her work to be overwhelming. It was simply not possible to visit all these people and address all their pastoral needs. It was during this time she learned of the Stephen Ministry Program. Along with an Associate of her Congregation, Mary Baus, Sister consulted with the pastor of the Methodist Church, where this ministry had been operative for many years. They researched every possible aspect of the ministry and discovered that it was named after St. Stephen, deacon and martyr, and was established in 1975 by a Lutheran minister who felt unable himself, to address all the needs, pastorally, of his parish. It has since become a nationwide training program for lay pastoral ministry. To become commissioned, a Stephen Minister must successfully complete a 50-hour course. This emphasizes and implants listening skills. It focuses on key topics, such as confidentiality, dying, hospitalization, feelings, suicidal tendencies, grieving, and the like.

After a thorough analysis of the ministry, Sister Marita put her findings in a report which she...
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2010-06 REN KP F921
Dear Friends of the Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks:

Sixty-four years ago, in September 1946, under the supervision of Father Edmund Anable, S.J., and the Sisters of Providence, fifty-five 1st-4th grade students began classes in the basement of Fairbanks’ historic Immaculate Conception Church. In 1951, six construction camp buildings and the old army officers club were moved to a site on Noyes Slough. These buildings, arranged under a single roof, became the home of Immaculate Conception School and of 115 elementary students. In 1955, the first 9th grade class met at Immaculate Conception Church. In 1956, a $400,000 high school, named after Father Francis Monroe, S.J., founder of the first Catholic Parish in Fairbanks, was completed and opened. On May 29, 1959, Alaska was celebrating its first year of statehood, as Fairbanks’ Monroe Catholic High School graduated its first senior class, a class of six. By 1978, enough funding had been secured for construction of a new two-story elementary school. In 1980, the first parent-funded kindergarten was held. Today, there are 450 students reaping the benefits of a Catholic education in Fairbanks.

Immaculate Conception Grade School and Monroe Catholic High School are situated in Fairbanks, just 100 miles south of the Arctic Circle, these schools educate students from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some live within walking distance, others travel 25 miles by bus or car, and still others have left their home villages and towns to board in Fairbanks to attend a Catholic school. The Catholic Schools of Fairbanks provide an educational environment that is rooted in faith, rich in academic excellence, strengthened by service and nurtured by community.

Until the 1980s, ICS and Monroe employed a large number of Religious, both men and women, and members of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. In the last 20 years, the JVC has turned its resources to other areas and there has been a significant decline in the number of Religious. The Religious and the volunteers donated a tremendous amount of time and energy at a very low cost. The ongoing increases in educational costs—and they are considerable—have gone largely to paying teachers and staff. That is why I, confident of your interest in our Catholic schools, and trusting in your generosity—and reassured by Our Lord’s words, “Knock and it shall be opened!”—find myself again knocking at your door.

Contributing to the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks will ensure that the schools will be able to pay for textbooks, computer supplies, salaries, maintenance costs, and other costs associated with running a school. Additionally, your donation will help keep tuitions at affordable levels so that more families will be able to have the choice in the education of their children. Finally, you will be part of a tradition of giving—dating back to 1946, when the schools opened in the basement of Immaculate Conception Church.

With all sincere, grateful, best wishes,

Donald J. Kettler,
Bishop of Fairbanks
presented to Bishop Kaniecki, who urged her at once to attend the two-week training program. The program became a reality in 1993, and in the seventeen years since its inception has made tremendous strides. Many, following Sister Marita’s example, have attended the course, taken the formal training and are now Stephen Ministers in their own parishes. Some have become trainers. Eventually 29 ministers were commissioned by Bishop Kaniecki to engage in supervised lay ministry in the Diocese of Fairbanks. Sister Marita continued to serve the Diocese as the Director of Stephen Ministry for the next ten years, and the ministry is flourishing to this day.

In 2003, along with Sister Marilyn Marx, S.N.J.M., former chancellor of the Diocese, Sister Marita fulfilled a dream—to serve the Native people of Alaska in a more tangible way, directly within the villages. With the reduction of priests and the need for Religious and lay people in the villages, the two Sisters answered a call to serve in the remote village of Galena, a predominately Koyukon Athabaskan Indian community. Sister Marita traveled to the village to co-direct the Kateri Tekakwitha Center. The center is first of its kind along the upper Yukon River, benefiting the villages of Galena, Huslia, Kaltag, Koyukuk, McGrath, Nulato, Ruby, and Tanana. The Sisters operated out of a building previously donated to the Diocese of Juneau. After its purchase, the house was converted, with the help of many volunteers, to living quarters, a training room, and an office and guest space. The center was blessed and dedicated by Bishop Donald J. Kettler on August 31, 2003. While the two Sisters resided in the Center and worked within the villages, they conducted classes including: a Retreat for Prayer Leaders and Eucharistic Ministers, Training for Lay People, Stephen Ministry Outreach, Adult Scripture Study, and Confirmation Preparation Training. In 2007, Sister Marita returned to Fairbanks to take on a new ministry as Director/Liaison of Urban Native Ministry. The Kateri Tekakwitha Center is now directed by the lay ministry of St. John Berchmans’ parish in Galena, headed by Agnes Sweetsir.

It has been in the capacity of Liaison that Sister Marita has spent these past few years. She reports directly to Bishop Kettler, keeping him informed of and alert to the spiritual needs of the Native people in Fairbanks. Sister attends meetings, potlatches, and celebrations. She has

*Sister Marilyn Marx, S.N.J.M., and Sister Marita Soucy, C.S.J., plant a spruce tree to commemorate the occasion of the opening and dedication of the Kateri Tekakwitha Training Center in Galena in 2003. The center is the first of its kind along the upper Yukon River. It benefits the villages of Galena, Huslia, Kaltag, Koyukuk, McGrath, Nulato, Ruby, and Tanana.*
witnessed the births of some of our newest Native Catholics and she has walked a few to the grave. She operates in much the same way as she did years ago, when she founded the Diocesan Stephen Ministry Program, yet her focus is more dedicated to our Native parishioners.

Sister Marita, upon arriving in Fairbanks, in 1986, also founded an Associate Program. The Program itself being “brand new” within the Congregation, began in 1985. The original charter members are still active as Associates today and Fairbanks boasts one of the largest Associate groups, now numbering over 20 women. Associate membership is contingent on a candidacy period, where the aspiring Associate discerns their call, learns about the Congregation’s charism, and, finally, commits in a formal ceremony to be enrolled as an Associate of the Sisters of St. Joseph. The Associates in Fairbanks join with the Sisters and Associates of the Congregation in prayer and, in particular, keep abreast of the Congregations’ goals and needs.

The Fairbanks Associates have an ongoing ministry and partnership with Fairbanks Counseling and Adoption. Their goal is to assist them with acquiring donations for their youth street outreach program. They also participate in an annual fundraiser for the Interior Cancer Society and support the local Relay for Life walk. Additionally, one of their primary ministries is a ministry of hospitality to those they meet and to each other, reaching out to that “dear neighbor” closest; families, fellow Associates, colleagues, and parish families. They also strive to take active roles within their parishes, serving in many capacities: Eucharistic Ministers, Lectors, Teachers, Cantors, Stephen Ministry Leaders, and Prison Outreach Ministers. They meet on the first Thursday of each month to pray together and discuss the groups’ goals.

The group will be without an in-house Sister for the first time, in their 24 years, as Sister Marita departs for her new assignment. At a farewell celebration, at Claire Desrochers home on August 15th, the Associates presented Sister Marita with a
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photo blanket, featuring Sister’s many successes through the years, and a hand-beaded moose hide photo frame made by Marie Yaska.

As difficult as it is for her many friends and family members to watch her go, it is heart-wrenching for Sister Marita, as well to leave. She will be returning to West Hartford, Connecticut, to her beloved Sisters of St. Joseph, not to retire, but to begin yet another ministry, with fellow Sister of St. Joseph Maris Stella. Incidentally, Sister Marita and Sister Maris entered together in 1949. The Sisters hope to help build a program that will benefit their fellow Sisters in the order’s infirmary and assisted-living center. “We have a lot of ideas of what we can do at the assisted living center and in the infirmary. We plan to liven it up and remind the sisters that they are still among the living!”

Robert Hannon, Diocesan Chancellor, remarks of Sister Marita, “She’s a gem. She is effervescent, compassionate, a remarkable listener, and somebody who has a wonderful sense of humor. She’s a pioneer. She was perfect for Alaska. She’d identify needs and go where no one had gone before.”

The name “Soucy” is French and translates in English to “care.” Care would well summarize Sister Marita Soucy’s ministry in Alaska, for she has well cared for all who have passed her way. She will be dearly missed, but her legacy of care will live on in the many children and adults that she has taught, trained, counseled, and heard. Sister Marita says if she could have a coat of arms, you would find upon it the words of St. Peter: “Cast all your cares on the Lord, knowing that He has a care for you.”

—Patty Walter

“We are blessed to have so many supporters who make our work possible. I want to especially thank those of you who remember us in your prayers. Donations provide tangible benefits, but the power of prayer and the Lord’s grace is our bedrock. Thank you with all our hearts.”

—Bishop Donald J. Kettler