

Celebrating a century of “transforming and lasting gifts”



Agneta Coates at 22, Somerset, 1931.



St. Gerard's after first Mass, 1971. Fr. Beauregard, left; Agneta, back.



Agneta Wright at 99, Bowen Island, 2008.

An apostolic blessing from Pope Benedict XVI for Agneta Wright of St. John the Apostle Parish in Vancouver and St. Gerard's Mission on Bowen Island will be presented at St. Gerard's on August 16th in honour of her 100th birthday.

Sadly, Agneta has passed away just short of that milestone. Obituaries in

this paper and on Kearney Funeral Services' website describe her life.

A deeper insight is found in a letter to Agneta from Father Murray Abraham, SJ, of Darjeeling, India: "Owning a home of their own has brought about a truly miraculous change in once pitifully poor families. How grateful I am that God has made

it possible—through you—for us to give the very special, transforming and lasting gifts of homes to these families."

Agneta's one luxury was her roomy but simple Bowen Island seasonal home that helped knit her family. She gave much of her income to good causes like Father Abraham's.

At 23, in Bridgwater, Somerset, England, the then Agneta Coates met Canon C. W. Davey, the much-loved pastor of her fiancé Harry Wright. Canon Davey guided her into the Catholic Church, and his framed portrait has held a place of honour in Agneta's living room ever since. His was the first of her ongoing spiritual friendships with priests.

Father Anthony, her parish priest in her Karachi years, 1937–45, was a friar as poor as St. Francis, and his meagre vestments were threadbare. Agneta took it upon herself to learn all about vestments and sewed a beautiful set for him.

Over the years, several priests and religious sisters benefitted from Agneta's prolific letters, in firmly flowing handwriting, that sustained her far-flung ties. Father Boniface Aicher, OSB, of Westminster Abbey, Mission, recently wrote, "Thank you for your lovely, faithful letter—at 99!" Father Boniface, 87, said his final goodbye by concelebrating Agneta's Mass of Christian Burial on June 25th, fulfilling a promise made years ago.

Back in the early 1960s, Agneta's letters told of a wonderfully dedicated priest, Father Gerard Beauregard, who celebrated Sunday Mass at Evergreen Hall on Bowen Island from spring to fall. A historical account inspired by Agneta's recollections describes him as "devout, ebullient, brilliant, eccentric, and deeply good." His homily style was stream of consciousness, but his enthusiasm conveyed a message beyond words.

He found a kinship with the islanders, and he drew new energy from the mission's steadfast trustees, including Agneta's husband Harry. Together, said Father Beauregard, they could build a church, and in 1971 they did. The church website fills out the tale.

In due time, Agneta suggested naming the church after St. Gerard Majella. Father Beauregard, who was devoted to his baptismal patron, was delighted. "I always promised Saint Gerard," he said, "that I would one day build a church in his name."

Quietly, Agneta and Harry gave to the limit of their means, as they had

done before to help build Vancouver churches. For the annual strawberry tea that raised thousands of dollars each summer, Agneta and Bowen Islanders of all faiths prepared for months. Soon there was a little rectory too—and no debt.

Harry died in 1976. Agneta carried on with faith and joy.

Each year, Agneta's large extended family gathers at St. Gerard's on the closest Sunday to August 17th, her birthday. This year, the 100th birthday celebration will go ahead even though Agneta will not be physically present. Her family will present a scroll, Agneta's apostolic blessing, to the people of St. Gerard's, and all will give thanks for Agneta's century of "transforming and lasting gifts."

The St. Gerard's website is at <http://StGerards,rcav.org>. It includes another excellent photo of Agneta at 99.