

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SISTER ELIZABETH ANN ECKERT, SSJD

I am the elected leader of an Anglican women's monastic community, the Sisterhood of St. John the Divine, founded in Toronto in 1884. Our sisters have been going to Loyola House in Guelph for the past fifteen years for retreats and other programs, and have experienced the renewal that can take place in an environment of peace, away from major urban development, and in a place open to all faith traditions. Its rural location is accessible to all, mostly people from Southwestern and Central Ontario but certainly by people from all over Canada, the United States and throughout the world, by its proximity to many major urban centres and means of transportation.

A retreat in the business world usually means taking a management team away from their regular place of business in order to have uninterrupted time and space for visioning. They have the quiet and space away from the office telephone, fax, email and questions of co-workers which interrupt their day in order to have unimpeded opportunity to think. A retreat such as is offered at Loyola House provides a prayerful space in a religious setting for people to be silent and experience in their solitude a quietening of the mind which helps to foster a listening heart, open and responsive to God. Meditating with a group of people together in the silence deepens the experience; there is a synergy that makes the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

We offer numerous retreats for people in our own house of prayer. Many of the retreats we offer are topical, based on a theme which gives people something on which to reflect and pray while they are in retreat over a weekend. The guests who come to our house, come because their prayer and meditation is supported by a praying monastic community. The retreats offered at Loyola House are usually of a longer duration, most being eight days although there are some

which are up to 40 days. Each retreatant there has the opportunity to meet daily with an experienced retreat director who guides each individual in their prayer. Most of the retreat directors who work at Loyola House have been trained through programs run at Loyola House.

Many people say they find an experience of God in nature. The natural beauty of the farm land and protected wetland areas is available for those in retreat at Loyola House to enjoy while they renew and refresh their bodies, as well as their minds. Many of our Sisters come back from their retreats with renewed energy both from the rest they have experienced, the periods of meditation or contemplation to renew and reaffirm their commitment (which instills renewed energy and passion for mission and service), and from daily exercise walking the grounds. All of life is sacred; mind, body and spirit and all must be attended to. From the experience of retreat, the Sisters are able to go back into their work with real freshness, vigour and insight. Often, what Sisters have learned about their own inner selves, has helped them in their work with other people in pastoral care at St. John's Rehab Hospital (Toronto, ON); in spiritual direction; and in our work in our own retreat and guest ministry.

I grew up in Ontario which instilled a great love for the tremendous diversity and beauty of Ontario's landscape. I also have a background in Forestry through Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, which gave me an appreciation for sustainable resource management. Forestry also taught me through first hand experience, the devastation of clear-cutting on the environment which would be akin to the deterioration of the environment around Loyola House if the proposed urban development goes through. Often driving upon the roads and highways of Ontario, you'll see an area where there are many dead trees beside a roadway caused by the changes in how the water drains and moves; a direct result of the roadway having a profound effect on nature. Parking lots have a tremendous effect on the areas surrounding them in this same way, changing the paths of water flow, to say nothing of the change in the water table due

to the cutting down of trees.

The Ignatius Jesuit Centre has made a major contribution, since 1913, to ecological understanding, organic farming, and aboriginal relations. Among other things, Loyola House, part of the Centre, pioneered the modern retreat movement in Canada, and has been a leader in that movement across the United States as well. The Jesuits of Upper Canada, who run the Centre, are open to all religious, ethnic, and cultural groups. The Centre provides not only a place of personal retreat, but is a focus of reconciliation among national and religious groups – something desperately needed in our contemporary world. They also teach others about retreats and spiritual direction which helps bring the intense retreat experience back into the communities of the people who use the facilities at Loyola House.

I speak from personal experience not only of Loyola House, but of my own community, which has had to face similar challenges. The Sisters of St. John the Divine moved our Mother House and Guest House from downtown Toronto to Willowdale in 1953, in order to find a place of relative peace and calm in an urban setting. We located on Botham Road, at the northwest corner of Yonge Street and what was to become Highway 401. Over the following fifty years, the development in the area increased exponentially, aided by the extension of the Yonge subway and the building of Highway 401. The gradual encroachment of large-scale commercial and high-density residential development forced us to make a decision, in 2003, to sell our property and seek a quieter place for our Mother House and our Guest House and retreat ministry. Both Sisters and Guests had become aware of the increasing noise and pollution over the years. Some Sisters felt their health was being adversely effected by the constant noise, and many Guests found it difficult to sleep with the constant roar of the traffic.

We built on Cummer Avenue, between Yonge Street and Bayview Avenue because we already owned a piece of property there and because we wanted to continue our urban retreat ministry – but in a location that lacked the air and noise pollution, and heavy traffic congestion of the Yonge/401 area. Our property is located next to St. John’s Rehab Hospital where a number of our Sisters work. Immediately to the west is a large home for the aged and across the street to the north are individual homes. Individuals who come on retreat at our Convent can walk on the grounds both of the convent and of the hospital, but if they desire a longer walk, then they need to walk through the neighbourhood. Its not quite the same as being able to have the complete quietness and solitude of being alone with God as you are able to feel when you are walking on the extensive farmlands of Loyola House.

I believe that the Ignatius Jesuit Centre will inevitably experience the same kind of problems if the current zoning revision is allowed to go through, but in a more damaging way than my own community experienced because their mission is to provide a rural retreat, not an urban one. If the plans go through, the ministry of Loyola House will ultimately come to an end – at least in that place. They will begin to discover, as we did, that one can no longer sit outdoors and read or carry on a conversation because of the noise in the area. They will soon discover that the older members of the community – and younger retreatants and visitors to the centre as well – will be unable to live there because of the poor air quality. And they will find that people do not want to come to their place of retreat because the beauty and quiet of a rural retreat has been replaced with the congestion and pollution endemic to other urban developments. We have seen an increase in those wanting to come on retreat in our new location, away from the 401. People need the opportunity for both urban retreat centres such as ours for short retreats supported by a

monastic praying community that lives on site, but also they need places of retreat in a more rural setting where they can have an extended stay and be undistracted by the encroachment of urban development.

Urban development is important, and my own community's mission is to an urban population. But if we are to keep the balance between urban, suburban, and rural in our Canadian geography, then some boundaries must be placed on urban development. A rural retreat like the Jesuit Centre inevitably enhances the value of urban development nearby – but not if it is so near as to threaten the very *raison d'être* of that rural retreat. Just as we need Provincial and National Parks, and areas of Protection for the environment, especially around watershed areas, we need opportunities for rural retreats close enough to urban centres to keep them accessible.

I believe, along with the application filed under Section 273(1) of the Municipal Act, that the new by-law which would permit major commercial development bordering the sacred lands of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre and the two adjacent cemeteries, contravenes the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in interfering with the religious beliefs and practices of individuals of many faiths who use Loyola House and other ministries of the Centre.

I and/or other members of the Sisterhood will be happy to answer questions or help in any way that will assist this application.

Sincerely yours,

Sister Elizabeth Ann Eckert, SSJD

Reverend Mother