

## WITNESS STATEMENT OF ELIZABETH (BETH) PORTER

### **Background:**

My religious practice has always been one of contemplative prayer since I was quite young. I grew up near what was old River Park in Winnipeg and from my university days I would take long reflective walks along the riverside trails. Walking the quiet, untended paths where great old oaks and elms and willows towered overhead and a multitude of birds sang in their branches and in the underbrush, I grieved losses and discovered my faith. It was in these walks in nature that I came in touch with a spiritual call and grew into an adult woman with a deep sense of the connection between the Creator and the beauty of creation. Part of my practice at that time and to this day is to pause for several minutes at a time to contemplate the beauty of the tiny details of nature—a very small wildflower, the veins of a leaf caught in the sun—and to be very still. One of the great gifts of nature is to impart this possibility of revelation in the stillness and silence. I experience the beauty of nature inviting me into stillness and then into inner awareness, into wonder, and into spiritual replenishment. Silence is an important contributor to the stillness. Noise is discordant and interferes with this possibility of seeing all of life more clearly.

In 1980, I became a Roman Catholic at Madonna House in the beautiful rural setting of Combermere, in the Madawaska Valley north of Bancroft, Ontario. It was especially the contemplative tradition in Catholicism that attracted me. The beauty of this setting in nature where I could walk and meditate regularly and also receive spiritual direction as part of my preparation to enter the Catholic Church had a profoundly

nurturing effect on my faith life. I realized then that to find spiritual direction together in the same place as the beauty of nature was very good for my spirit and gave me perspective and strength and the kind of loving spiritual energy that was important for my life and work--at that time, as a teacher.

**Importance of the Ignatius Centre and lands to my spiritual life and practice:**

Early in 1981, I joined the L'Arche Daybreak community in Richmond Hill. In L'Arche communities people with and without developmental disabilities share life and create a home together. I have continued as a full time worker at L'Arche and am marking my 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. While I loved L'Arche immediately, I quickly discovered it to be a demanding lifestyle. In June of 1981, after the three-month orientation period, I made my first retreat at the Ignatius centre in Guelph, to discern whether I would continue in L'Arche. I met with Fr. Dan Phalen, a Jesuit priest and spiritual director, and I took long walks around the farm and woodland trails, meditating and taking in the beauty of the natural setting. I was thrilled to discover there was a centre I could come to just over an hour's drive from Richmond Hill where my two deep needs for spiritual replenishment could be met: a place of beauty and silence where I could walk and meditate in nature and a place where I could find excellent spiritual direction. My decision to continue at L'Arche and not return to the (much more lucrative) life of a teacher was strongly influenced by my sense that there would be support for my L'Arche lifestyle readily accessible because of the proximity of this beautiful Jesuit locale and the spiritual guidance it included .

Combermere is a four and a half hour drive from Richmond Hill, and while I returned there occasionally during my early years in L'Arche, it was not possible to make that trip more than a couple of times a year. (L'Arche assistants, as the live-in residential counsellors are called, have just one free weekend per month.) The Ignatius centre in Guelph soon became the place of spiritual sustenance for me.

The fact that the Jesuits, who are deeply attuned to a contemplative spirituality and are gifted spiritual guides, have been the ones to care for and preserve this beautiful property is not an accident, I feel. As it happens, the Jesuits are also quite attuned to the life of L'Arche and are gifted in their ability to support those of us who commit to life in L'Arche.

L'Arche assistants do not have much free time even today and had less in the 80s, but it was quite possible to drive out to Guelph, go for a meditative walk along the farm trails, have a talk with a spiritual director, and drive back to Richmond Hill all in an afternoon. To me the proximity of this special Jesuit centre and its sacred land to the large urban centres of Toronto and Hamilton is enormously important. I know that I am one of many people in these urban centres and their sprawling, often ugly suburbs, who cherish this beautiful place and are grateful that it is accessible even by public transit.

By the later 80's I had formed a relationship of spiritual direction with Fr. Bill Clarke who continues as my spiritual director today. I began to make periodic weekend retreats and, usually, my annual week-long retreat in one of the hermitages rather than staying in the Ignatius college building or Loyola House. The hermitages are especially sacred spaces in my experience. There, in the profound silence and solitude, surrounded by pristine snow in winter or all the beauty of the other seasons, I find that I meet again

the gentle and beautiful compassion of God and am renewed. In the spring and summer I walk the newer wetland trails at the south end of the property where there is so much beauty and life. In the winter I have seen owls and deer as I've snow-shoed the fields and wooded area. These places and moments are sacred doorways for me. Always I am brought to stillness and to worship and awe. Awe and wonder, says Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, are at the root of all creativity. Today much of my work in L'Arche is in writing, and I find that my writing flows much better after a time of replenishment in one of the hermitages.

The care for the land by those who own it and farm it, the attitude of reverence for the gifts of nature that I notice in those who tend the organic farming plots, and the sense that the land is loved and valued as sacred is palpable, and it is a wonderful gift in a society where monetary value seems almost always to trump everything else.

**Concerns about proposed development impinging on my spiritual practice:**

The sky that used to be so bright with stars at night, is now more aglow around the horizon with the lights of development! This is particularly true of the south-looking view from the New Creation Hermitage. I was disappointed when I spent my 8-day retreat there this month to realize that all night long I could see lights from what was apparently the Home Depot along Woodlawn Road and that the glow significantly decreased the visibility of the stars. One of my deepest concerns is about the increase in light that will inevitably be a part of any further development, particularly one almost

double the size of Home Depot, however discreet, on the property to the south. There will be not only the floodlights of the parking lot (however the company plans to limit these, they cannot but add to the amount of light in the night sky), but also the lights of hundreds of vehicles through every evening of the week.

The encroachment of development has been evident for the past few years. There are few vistas where signs of the new development all around the property do not intrude to some extent. The sense of solitude is already partially compromised. When I see the signs of this, it deeply saddens me. And in the quiet and stillness of night prayer, there can already suddenly intrude across the fields the noise of a huge transport truck changing gears. It seems to me that these encroachments are reaching the saturation point. The scale of this proposed development would tip the balance.

Where I live in Richmond Hill, in an apartment building just south of Major Mackenzie Drive near Bayview Avenue, I am only a few blocks from a new Walmart store on Major Mackenzie just east of Bayview. Since it was opened a couple of years ago there has been an enormous increase in traffic. I pass it often. It is busy all day long, and even at 9:50 p.m. its parking lot is totally packed with cars. (It closes at 10 p.m.) I cannot imagine such a store in Guelph would be any less a mecca for traffic. In addition there would be a constant stream of supply trucks and semi-trailers to re-stock the store, adding to the noise and pollution. Surely there are other possible locations around Guelph where this increase in traffic would have little effect. It seems a shame—a travesty, really--for Walmart to choose an area for development that will further compromise the sacred quality of the Ignatian land.

Another grave concern I have about the proposed development of a large commercial outlet such as Walmart on the north-west corner of Woodlawn and Woolwich, so near the Jesuit wetlands and cemetery, is the spirit that this kind of store attracts. I have been inside Walmarts, and I know the kind of frenetic shopping that the atmosphere in them encourages. It draws out of people an intense need to buy and consume more and more things. It is an atmosphere that can be felt in the spirit immediately, and it does not resonate with any kind of spiritual practice.

This kind of bargain consumer outlet awakens some of the worst tendencies of what Alvin Toffler some years ago called “the throw-away society.” It encourages among the human community a crass culture of need and exploitation—a culture that makes people feel that they never have enough, that they must have more and more things to be happy, and it is a culture that encourages an attitude of using and discarding the things of the earth. It is an attitude that is the opposite of the valuing and treasuring that is so integral to the kind of spiritual practice that nourishes me.

Sacred places, places of natural beauty that have been well prayed in, have a spiritual quality that is quite delicate and needs to be respected and protected. This is very true of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre land. I do not usually use the word “vibes” in my spiritual vocabulary, but my concern is that the “vibes” of commercialism will deal a powerful additional blow to the already suffering spirit of beauty and holiness that pervades this land. I will not be able to spend time in the hermitage there, with the intrusion of additional light and noise and traffic and of these unwanted and disturbing vibes, nor will I be able to find spiritual replenishment walking the wetlands and farm

trails. Where else will I go? I therefore plead with you to decide against this development.