

# The Women, A Bishop and a Princess: A CWL Story Found in Boxes

*Contributed by Deb Majer Fraser, Diocesan Archivist*

A number of years ago, I was researching through Bishop Michael Fallon's papers of 1910 to 1931 and came across files dealing with the Catholic Women's League (CWL). The files consisted of correspondence from women and priests from across the diocese and an Austrian Princess Franziska (Fanny) von Starhemberg. My curiosity was piqued!

I was already familiar with the diocesan Catholic Women's League archives, so combining the information from both Bishop Fallon's papers and the CWL papers gave me an opportunity to piece together an extraordinary part of our diocesan history.

The Catholic Women's League formed in England in 1906. The League found its way to Canada in 1917, with the Archdiocese of Montreal being the first chartered Canadian CWL. The Archdiocese of Toronto followed suit in 1918, the Diocese of Halifax next in 1919, and the Diocese of London in 1920. It would be another three years before the London branch of the CWL was chartered—only the third in all of Canada.

But what does a princess from Austria have to do with this story? Bishop Fallon travelled to Europe twice between 1918 and 1920. It's uncertain when he would have met Princess Fanny, but there is no doubt that on one of these overseas voyages he met a very influential and dynamic woman who was a princess and a member of the Upper House of the Austrian parliament.

Through correspondence, it is clear that a relationship, steeped in social justice, developed between the princess and our bishop. Princess Fanny sought support from Bishop Fallon for clothing and monetary gifts to help with the humanitarian crisis in Austria after the First World War. Princess Fanny described in her letter how her people were starving and destitute. By early 1921, efforts were made to ship large quantities of clothing to Austria. The women of this diocese assisted with this relief effort.

In 1918, at the request of the Canadian Government, Bishop Fallon spent time between May and September in England and France. He visited Canadian soldiers and chaplains in camps and at the front. He was there on official duty as the Head Chaplain for English Speaking Catholic Chaplains during the War. While in England, Bishop Fallon witnessed the CWL in action as they served British and Canadian soldiers.

"The CWL had a hut for the recreation and refreshment of the soldiers," wrote Bishop Fallon in his diary on June 15, 1918. There were a number of additional entries in his diary where he makes mention of the CWL hut and the services to the soldiers. This was very likely the first exposure Bishop Fallon had to the workings of the CWL, and there is no question that he realized the value of such an organization.

The first group photo of the Diocese of London CWL was taken outside of St. Peter's Cathedral, London, in June of 1920. The effort to grow the CWL in the diocese revealed itself by fall 1921, when the first diocesan conference was held. In a directive from Bishop Fallon, October 6, 1921, he urged his parish priests to invite women to get involved and attend the first official CWL meeting on October 25, 1921, at St. Peter's Cathedral parish hall.

Any priest who did not support the advancement of the CWL in his parish would receive a curt letter, and that was the end of that! Because of Bishop Fallon's ardent support of the League, he became the national chaplain of the CWL in the 1920s. He was frequently

asked to travel across Canada to help various dioceses establish their own CWLs. Bishop Fallon was met with great success.

From its earliest years, the Catholic Women's League, was established to get women involved in social, political, and public affairs. The earliest documents of the CWL reveal that the members "hit the ground running" and, in my opinion, have never stopped since. It is impressive and almost surprising that the programs and services they established early on still endure; initiatives such as:

- Establishing Girl Guides and Brownie groups at the parish level;
- Establishing summer camps for girls ages 5 to 18;
- Providing scholarships for teenage girls to attend university;
- Implementing school medical and dental clinics;
- Insisting on medical inspectors and that nurses visit local schools;
- Ensuring that every school had a first aid kit and a bed;
- Ensuring that children were attending school;
- Clothing drives for students;
- Mothers' Clubs;
- Current events, book clubs, and spelling and oratory clubs;
- Visiting the aged and orphaned;
- Visiting jails and hospitals; and
- Assisting and financially supporting immigrants.

The CWL did not limit their support and programming to Catholics; they helped those in greatest need as they still do today. This history does not end here and could go on for pages. The joy of being able to share a story where a princess is involved is almost fairy-tale like. But an even greater joy is piecing together a story that has as much relevance in our diocese and local communities today as it did back when the CWL was first established.



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