

Shawls to Help the Suffering September 2015



Since the creation of Shawls of Compassion in March 2014 by Lucille Blanchette and Omer Fontaine, the members of this organization have been giving their time and energy to help support those who are suffering.

The 'Shawls of Compassion' team – Photo by Robert Dacquay

From left to right: Florence Bourguoin, Yvette Charrière, Rosemarie Proteau, Omer Fontaine, Hélène Fontaine, Lucille Blanchette, Danielle Collette, Agnès Préfontaine (not shown: Isabelle Garand, Jacqueline Côté and Ginette Roy)

Shawls of Compassion has brought together eleven people to date. As a group, they have accumulated more than 1,000 volunteer hours of knitting and crocheting shawls that will be donated to people in need who are looking for some comfort during a loss or illness. Thanks to the support of the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) of Saints-Martyrs-Canadiens, the members of Shawls of Compassion began their adventure a year and a half ago. "I have a friend who is sick, who herself received a shawl knitted by a group from Florida called Prayer Shawls," explained Omer Fontaine. "She was suffering. I could see how much comfort this gift brought her. It's because of the encouragement of Rita Rioux, a former teaching colleague, that I decided to try and form a group in our parish. I asked Lucille Blanchette for her help, and she accepted. We have the support of the Parish Pastoral Council of Saints-Martyrs-Canadiens."

Although the majority of the group's members belong to Saints-Martyrs-Canadiens, the shawls are not meant solely for the members of that parish. They are distributed all over, and anybody can request one. "It's important to make clear that this project is not meant only for the benefit of our parish members. On the contrary, although the organization operates under the auspices of the parish, the shawls are meant for anybody who needs one, regardless of religion, parish, or province," explained Lucille Blanchette.

But these are more than just simple shawls. People who come and request a shawl are looking for a source of comfort, either for themselves or for somebody close to them. "It's not just a matter of knitting an object. We always light a candle so that the light and the Holy Spirit are with us. While knitting, we pray for all those who receive these shawls."

Omer Fontaine explained all the spirituality connected with the shawls: "When we get together to knit or crochet, a collective prayer is said, then each person prays for the future recipients. Then the shawls are blessed by the priest during a mass.



*Photo by Robert Dacquay
Omer Fontaine, H el ene Fontaine, Yvette Charri ere, Agn es Pr efontaine
Isabelle Garand, Lucille Blanchette, Ginette Roy, Father Isa ie Blanchette*

Finally, a prayer is always pronounced during a later mass for those who have received a shawl. By the end, the shawls are imbued with a compassionate spirituality."

Although similar organizations already exist elsewhere throughout the world, it is necessary to note the importance of this first French-language Shawls of Compassion movement. "Shawls of Compassion exists all over the world," said Lucille Blanchette, "especially in many churches. But, to our knowledge, we are the first francophone group in Manitoba to establish such a group." The two founders of the project would like to see it expand even more: "We haven't done much publicity until now, but we would very much like to spread the word so that other parishes might adopt the idea and begin their own movement, given the comfort that these shawls can bring to people experiencing hardship."

Although these shawls comfort those in need, the people who make them also undergo a certain personal growth. As Omer Fontaine noted: "We experience meaningful moments, it's touching, we realize how important faith can be for some people. We realize that we are not alone. Every member is aware of what this project brings to him or her on a personal level."

Lucille Blanchette commented on the future of the group: "If the first blessing took place in November of 2014, we have currently distributed 15 shawls. We hope that Shawls of Compassion will continue into the future, and that new members will join us."