

**Servant of God Elisabeth Turgeon (1840-1881):
The Maternal Tenderness of God for His Children
Beatification in Rimouski, April 26, 2015**



Her Life

Elisabeth Turgeon was born on February 7, 1840, in Beaumont, a few kilometers from Lévis, across the Saint Lawrence River from Quebec City. She was the fifth in a family of eight girls and two boys. Agifted student, she wanted to pursue an education but the premature death of her father when she was only 15 meant that she had to set her plans aside. She stayed home and helped her mother with the education of her younger sisters. From an early age, Elisabeth showed signs of a mature faith. At 20, she was at last able to go the Laval teacher's college in Quebec to prepare to work as a teacher. She obtained her diploma with distinction, despite some periods of enforced rest because of difficulties with her health.

In 1863, she became the principal of a school in Saint Romuald d'Etchemin, near the family home. She was a good teacher, but had two brushes with death and had to take a year off. At the end of the 1871-1872 school year, another bout of illness forced her to quit for good. Once her health was restored, she opened a private class in Saint Roch, Quebec, but once again she was unable to continue. She turned with trust to "good Saint Anne" and promised to teach for free at Saint-Anne-de-Beaupré if she were healed. As she was fulfilling this promise, Father Jean Langevin, who had been named Bishop of Rimouski, asked her to come and direct the small community of teachers that was being formed there. She couldn't give him a positive response because of her health. However, Bishop Langevin did not give up, and upon receiving his third insistent letter, Elisabeth Turgeon believed that God's will was for her to go into religious life.

She arrived in Rimouski on April 3, 1875. Several devout young women were already there, including her sister, Louise. Bishop Langevin called the group the Sisters of the Elementary Schools.¹ He entrusted to Elisabeth the task of forming good teachers to fulfill the need for Christian education for the poor children of the surrounding countryside. On September 12, 1879, Elisabeth and twelve of her companions took vows. As a religious, she understood Christ to be the husband of her soul, to whom she could refuse nothing. Her ambition was to live in conformity with the divine will as she perceived it in the events of every day, in the decisions of authority figures, and in the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. When she was made superior, Mother Marie Elisabeth (her name in religious life) occupied herself with establishing the community of Sisters. She regularized its status, including its civil charter, its constitutions, and the rule for the conduct of Sisters in mission and for the management of schools. She founded the community's first mission on January 2, 1880, and two others the following September, in outlying, poor parts of the Diocese of Rimouski. It was a daring move, proof of great trust in God. Then she opened a private school in Rimouski, where the novices could have their first teaching experience.

Charity was the unifying principle in Elisabeth's life. She learned to love by letting herself be loved. She offered love to everyone, especially her Sisters. They found her very attentive and always filled with goodness toward them, concerned for their health, making sure they had what they needed. Her love was made up of tenderness; one of her companions recalled that she was quick to forgive and accepted everyone with never any bitterness or animosity. Her health challenges ought to have limited her ability to work as a teacher, but she made up for it with exceptional moral force. Her constant sweet nature and serenity always masked her suffering. She must have been in deep communion with God to have been able to study and pray all day and to do the necessary manual work at night by candlelight. Mother Marie Elisabeth patiently and joyfully overcame hunger, cold, and bodily weakness and, in imitation of Jesus, she kept silent when falsely accused by others.

It was inevitable that the frail health of this Servant of God would give out. In the face of death, she witnessed for her Sisters an entire submission to the Lord who was calling her one last time. On her deathbed, she reminded those present what the Lord was calling them to: "My Sisters, I particularly recommend union, in fraternal charity, for when you are united in a community, when peace reigns among its members, it is heaven on earth." She died peacefully on August 17, 1881, at the age of 41. She left to mourn 14 professed Sisters as well as a novice and two postulants.

From 1881 to 2015, 1,005 young women have committed their lives to follow Elisabeth Turgeon. The Sisters of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary today are present in Quebec, the United States, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

Her Spirituality

The spirituality of Elisabeth Turgeon was centered on the quest to know and accomplish the will of God: "My God and my Everything! All for your holy Love!"² The radical nature of this choice meant that the words and acts of her everyday life had a wonderful coherence. When she perceived the expression of God's will through whatever befell her, she accepted it, submitted to it, and acted upon it. She was a woman of deep conviction: she believed that God's will was always for the better, even in the midst of afflictions and trials. "Everything turns out for the best

¹ In 1891 they would adopt the name Sisters of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary.

² The quotations are translations of passages from Servant of God Elisabeth Turgeon's letters to her Sisters in the missions (January 1880 to June 1881) and from the booklet *Sentences* ("Sayings") which contains excerpts from her letters and the notes in her journal.

for those who seek the will of God.” “The will of God is an active power for those who conform themselves to it.” She always reminded her spiritual daughters to be attentive to the will of God; she invited them to judge the decisions they made in the light of that will: “Consider everything before God; he will inspire you with the knowledge of what to do.” She would speak of resignation, a movement of yielding her whole self to the will of God with an abandon that she lived intensely day by day. The quality of her obedience, particularly toward diocesan authority, made it clear that she recognized the will of God there too. On the day of her burial, the Bishop said of Elisabeth, “She was obedient.”

Her spirituality centred on the mission of teaching and Christian education. This was essentially the mission of Christ and the Church, the mission of salvation which had to be transmitted through education and the instruction of poor country children, and was realized in the consecrated life. “Try to become good and worthy religious and you will be excellent teachers,” she would say. It was not an easy mission, but one to be approached with “trust, courage, and perseverance in the path we have chosen; rest will come after our work, victory after combat and joy after pain.” She counted on God for the success of the mission: “He will strengthen you and enlighten you, and he will give intelligence to those whom you are bringing to him.”

Her spirituality was lived in Christian faith, charity, and hope. Very early, Elisabeth Turgeon had heard the invitation of God the Father, “the good God”, to enter into communion with him. She abandoned herself completely to him: “Let us throw ourselves into the arms of the Divine Mercy, who wants only our spiritual good.” The image of Jesus that most often came into her conversation about him was the biblical divine spouse, who died and rose for our salvation. When she spoke to her Sisters, she almost always referred to the traditional image of the Sister as a bride of the divine Spouse: “Say to Jesus: to be your spouse for ever, I want to follow you on the road which you have travelled.” Her whole ambition was to know Jesus, to love him, and to make him known to children. Her greatest desire was for the “glorious heaven to open” so she could at last see him face-to-face. She would encourage her Sisters by saying, “Let us work hard and consistently to be worthy of such an incomparable dwelling and such wonderful company.”

Elisabeth Turgeon had a strong and vital practice of intercessory prayer. She had constant recourse to prayer, and asked her Sisters to pray and to get their pupils to pray for her. She relied completely on prayer for the necessities of life, for healing, for help in managing practical affairs, for conversion, and for special graces for herself and others. She knew from experience that “with the protection of Jesus Christ, spider webs are stronger than walls and, without his protection; the strongest walls are but spider webs.” Thankful to God for having chosen her for a mission to the young, she prayed for the glory of God to be manifest and for the salvation of souls. She showed tremendous trust in Mary and had particular devotion to “this good Mother”, “our true Mother”, the “Queen of Virgins”. She wrote: “Let us call on Mary, who will know how to protect and defend us.” “Pray to the Holy Virgin,” she would write, “to teach with you and for you, and your students will make great progress in knowledge and virtue.” For Elisabeth Turgeon, Mary was the surest way to go to Jesus. This explains the motto of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary: “All for Jesus through Mary.”

For further information:

English

<http://www.soeursdusaintrosaire.org/elisabeth/beatification.php>

<http://www.soeursdusaintrosaire.org/education/centre.php>

French

<http://www.soeursdusaintrosaire.org/elisabeth/beatification.php>

<http://www.soeursdusaintrosaire.org/education/centre.php>

http://officedecatechese.qc.ca/quete_sens/radio_quau/2015/20150421.html

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