

Blessed Mother Marie-Léonie (Élodie Paradis, 1840-1912)

A Spirit of Service

Feast day: 4 May



Her Life

Élodie Paradis was born on May 12, 1840, in the village of L'Acadie, Quebec, the third in a family of six children. As she was growing up, a family friend, Camille Lefebvre, joined the Congregation of Holy Cross, which had recently arrived in Canada. He told Élodie about the existence of a community of religious women, the Marianite Sisters of Holy Cross, whose mission was to serve in institutions established by priests and men religious. She entered their novitiate at the age of 14, taking the name in religion of Sister Marie of Sainte Léonie. She taught in Varennes, in Ville Saint-Laurent, and in Saint-Martin de Laval before being sent, in 1862, to New York, where the Sisters had just accepted responsibility for an orphanage.

In 1870, she was asked to teach French and needlework in the community's novitiate in Indiana. Then she stayed briefly at Lake Linden, Michigan, before being called, in 1874, to direct a team of novices and postulants at Memramcook College in New Brunswick. The director was her old family friend, now a Holy Cross priest, Father Camille Lefebvre. She felt drawn to offer domestic service in colleges, which were becoming more numerous in the dioceses of Canada and New England.

She opened a sewing workshop for young Acadian women attracted to the consecrated life. The community evolved, and on August 26, 1877, 14 of the young women donned the religious habit. On May 31, 1880, the new community, based on the model of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, was recognized by the Holy Cross Fathers. For nearly 20 years, Mother Marie-Léonie persisted in asking the Most Reverend John Sweeney, Bishop of St. John, New Brunswick, to approve her Institute as an autonomous religious community. In 1895, some of the Sisters went to serve in the diocesan seminary in Sherbrooke. The Most Reverend Paul

LaRocque, Bishop of Sherbrooke, welcomed the motherhouse and the novitiate of the Little Sisters of the Holy Family, and approved the Institute on January 26, 1896.

Mother Marie-Léonie pursued the work of educating and promoting the human and spiritual welfare of the poor illiterate girls who were attracted by the new community. She understood the importance of the service they offered to the diocesan colleges that were struggling to find adequate personnel. She travelled regularly to respond to new needs, but especially to oversee the formation of her Sisters and to resolve the practical problems involved in the management of their communities. In her correspondence, advice on cooking, menu preparation, gardening and building maintenance is given along with advice on spirituality and health. When she died on May 3, 1912, the Institute of the Little Sisters of the Holy Family consisted of 38 active foundations in Canada and the United States. Mother Marie-Léonie was beatified in Montreal on September 11, 1984, by Pope (now Saint) John Paul II, during his visit to Canada.

Her Spirituality

From the earliest days of her life as a member of a religious community, Sister Marie-Léonie was drawn by the idea of giving material and moral support to help priests in the work of educating the young. She intuitively understood the idea of “the common priesthood of the faithful” that would be highlighted at the Second Vatican Council. Inspired by the example of Mary and the faithful women who followed Jesus during his life on earth, she wanted to serve Christ, to be a disciple and a witness, by collaborating with priests in their ministries and by improving the quality of life of the young people who attended the colleges. “It seems to me that priests need auxiliaries in their apostolic work and no one seems to be aware of this. ... This thought haunts me without let-up and strangely upsets me,” she wrote.

By ensuring the training of the young women who wanted to collaborate in her work, the founder was also ensuring their well-being. Most of these women came from poor families, and religious life was their hope of contributing something meaningful and getting a better education than their families could provide. As she wrote in 1899 to a priest at Suncook, New Hampshire, “The community of the Little Sisters of the Holy Family was founded to give poor, uneducated young girls the advantages of religious life.”

Mother Marie-Léonie’s faith meant that she saw and served Christ in the person of the priest. She was intelligent and gifted with good judgment and a practical sense. She did not deny that a priest could be a flawed human being. She advised her Sisters not to talk about priests, “for fear of only speaking well of them.” The important thing was the spiritual dimension of the priesthood: “Redouble your courage and generosity in the service of God in the person of his ministers and in their works,” she urged the nuns. “Think of the favour God will deign to give as you collaborate in the beautiful work of education.”

Bishop Paul LaRocque would say that she spent her life giving herself away: “She always had her arms open and her heart was transparent. She was always ready with a hearty, open laugh, welcoming each person as if they were God himself. She was a woman of the heart.” Her generosity was not limited to her religious family. No matter how poor her community might have been, she responded without hesitation to all needs. She helped the sick who came to the door or a family that she met in her travels. She hospitably received several religious who had been forced to leave France. Her missionary spirit was so strong that she adopted a young Berber woman, whose son became the first-ever priest from his ethnic group.

“Our mission in the Church is to help the priest on the temporal and spiritual planes,” she wrote. “But what it really demands as a supreme witness is for us to love one another and to love all people, not with just any love, but with all the love that God wants to give them. We must therefore repeat without tiring that our principal work is to give love.”

For further information:

English

<http://www.centremarie-leonieparadis.com/index.php?l=en>

http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/paradis_elodie_14F.html

Book (in French): *Mère Marie-Léonie 1840-1912 fondatrice des Petites Soeurs de la Sainte-Famille, béatification, Montréal, 11 septembre 1984 par le Pape Jean-Paul II, Montréal, Fides, 1984, ISBN 2-7621-1237-0.*

French

<http://www.centremarie-leonieparadis.com/index.php?l=fr>

http://www.biographi.ca/fr/bio/paradis_elodie_14F.html

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