

Saint Marie of the Incarnation (1599-1672)

The Teresa of New France

Feast Day: April 30



Her Life

Marie Guyart was born in Tours, France, on October 28, 1599. As a young child of seven, she said “Yes” to the Lord when she dreamed that he asked her to be his. At age 17, although she was attracted to cloistered life, she obeyed her parents’ desire for her to marry the master silk worker Claude Martin. He died only two years later and, at 19 years of age, she was a widow with a six-month-old son, also named Claude. She liquidated her husband’s business, which she discovered to be on the verge of bankruptcy. Penniless, she went to live with her family and took care of the education of young Claude.

From this time, her prayer life grew stronger. She was given a strong sense of the presence of God and sought to intensify her union with the divine, with whom she spoke “with intimacy”. She led a profoundly contemplative life, she also remained involved in practical life. She put her administrative talents to good use, when, in 1621, her brother-in-law asked her to take over the management of his transportation company. She spent her days in a stable in the harbor. It also served as a storehouse and a shelter for the longshoremen. She could sometimes be found late into the night at the wharf, supervising the loading and unloading of merchandise.

Her call to consecrated life pursued her, so in 1631 she asked her sister to look after her son, who was now 12 years old, and she entered the novitiate of the monastery of the Ursulines of Tours. She took the name in religion of Marie of the Incarnation.

In 1639, her superiors invited her to respond to her conviction that God was calling her to Canada, there “to create a house for Jesus and Mary.” She embarked from Dieppe on May 4, with two other Ursulines and four Hospital Sisters. They travelled with Madeleine Chauvigny de la Peltrie, a wealthy woman who had decided to place her fortune at the service of the founding of New France. When she arrived in Quebec, Marie of the Incarnation would later write, “The first thing we did was to kiss the ground of the place to which we had come to fulfill our lives in the service of God and the Indigenous people.” She was never to return to France.

She organized the building of a small monastery for the consecrated community and a boarding school for Indian and French girls whom the Ursulines decided to shelter and educate together. She welcomed and fed the Huron and Algonquin adults who knocked at the door; she gave them Christian instruction and encouraged them to share the Good News with their communities. In fact, her door was always open to everyone: governors, notable personages, the local inhabitants as well as woodsmen, French and Indian alike. It was a welcoming place where everyone could find counsel as well as material help.

She wrote the Constitutions and Rule of the Ursulines of Quebec (1647), and created dictionaries, grammars, catechisms and prayer books in four First Nations languages. Then, at the request of her son, by now a member of the Benedictine Order, she wrote an autobiographical memoir on “her states of prayer and of grace”. The experiences she reveals place her among the masters of the spiritual life. A collection of her lessons to the novices at Tours has also been conserved. The intensely mystical quality of her writing led the well-known French Bishop Bossuet to give her the nickname of “the Teresa of New France”, after Saint Teresa of Avila.

She maintained an ongoing correspondence with her relatives, friends and benefactors in France. Nearly 300 letters have been conserved; they are of great historical and spiritual interest.

Marie of the Incarnation died in Quebec on April 30, 1672. She was beatified by Pope (now Saint) John Paul II on June 22, 1980 and canonized by Pope Francis on April 3, 2014.

Her Spirituality

When she looked back on her life from earliest childhood, Marie Guyart recognized, “God never led me by a spirit of fear, but by love and trust.” She found that from her earliest days she had a tendency to respond to the good and an ardent desire to respond to God’s love and make him known.

Even as a young girl she was compassionate toward the poor and wanted to give away everything she had. “I cannot say how much I loved them. I felt a deep resentment toward those who refused to be charitable.” It was said of her that she had been born to be charitable.

Almost all her life, she was busy with multiple tasks. She lived her relationship with God in activity. She wrote, “Those worries never diverted my attention from God who was my constant preoccupation. On the contrary, I was strengthened because everything I did was in a spirit of charity and not for my personal profit.”

It can be said that she responded to the invitation of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to share their inner life. She lived a relationship of love with God, one based on trust, faithfulness, and mutual self-giving. She wrote to her son, “Why should one hesitate to lose oneself in him who seeks to, and will, purify us if we abandon ourselves to him? ... It gives me much more pleasure to love and attend to him than to stop to consider my baseness and my unworthiness.”

She addressed God with familiarity, as her protector: “My love, there is no way I can do all these tasks; please do them for me. Otherwise, they will not get done.”

Nothing could separate her from God, not even the dark nights and the trials that she experienced. She wrote to her son, “When I see myself becoming powerless, I try to lose myself in him, and if my heart has the strength for it, he knows well how to work with it. ... To speak to you in a somewhat ingenuous way, my life consists of this exchange.”

Marie of the Incarnation burned with a desire that the God whom she loved should be known and loved by others. She developed a spirituality that was marked by its universality. The apostolic prayer that she recited every day bears witness to this:

It is by the heart of my dear Jesus, my way, my truth and my life, that I approach you, O eternal Father. ... In spirit I go around the world seeking the souls redeemed by the most precious blood of my Divine Spouse, in order to make reparation for them by this divine Heart. I kiss them to present them to you through him, and through him I ask you for their conversion. ... Ah, let them live by the divine Heart.

Joining contemplation and action in a most marvelous way, she found God in all things and thus also lived in familiarity with the Virgin Mary: “I felt her without seeing her, near me, accompanying me everywhere in the alleys and byways that it suited him to lead me through in the building.” She tells of a time when she invited Mary to come with her to inspect a construction site: “Come, Blessed Mother, let’s go see our workers,” she prayed.

Saint Joseph appeared to her and offered to guide her steps as she envisioned her life in Canada. He remained her protector, always close to Jesus and Mary.

For further information:

English

http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/guyart_marie_1E.html

<http://www.ursulines-uc.com/eng/marie.php>

French

http://www.biographi.ca/fr/bio/guyart_marie_1E.html

<http://www.ursulines-uc.com/marie.php>

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