

## **Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys (1620-1700):**

### **The Pilgrim Daughter of the Church**

**Feast Day: January 12**



#### **Her Life**

Marguerite Bourgeoys was born in Troyes, Champagne, France, in 1620. Even as a young girl, she demonstrated an aptitude for “gathering together the girls” of her age and for group life and organization. At twenty, she saw a statue of the Virgin that deeply “touched and changed” her. She enrolled in the “external” Congregation of Notre Dame in Troyes and pronounced a vow of chastity when she was 23. She wanted to try a new form of life to honour “the life in the world of the Holy Virgin”, in which “without a veil or a wimple, one would be a true religious.”

In 1652, Governor Paul de Chomedey de Maisonneuve was trying to find a teacher who could come to Ville-Marie (Montreal). He and Marguerite met, and she offered her services. She set out on a ship in 1653, carrying only a small bag. She was 33. In the course of the voyage, she nursed people suffering from illness. For four years, she worked for the Governor. She also helped Jeanne Mance at Hôtel-Dieu Hospital; she gave up her mattress and blankets to people

who had less than she did, and won over the settlers, for whom she became a trusted counsellor. In 1657, she organized the erection of a chapel that would serve as a place of pilgrimage in honour of Mary. The project was completed the next year. From that time, the chapel has housed the miraculous statue of Notre-Dame du Bon-Secours (Our Lady of Good Help), which Baron de Fancamp had given Marguerite in 1672.

In 1658, Maisonneuve gave her a community stable in which to start her school. She began day classes and then a boarding school for the daughters of colonists as well as girls from the Iroquois First Nation. She formed a religious community for young women (today the Congregation of Notre Dame). She went back to France in 1659 and again in 1671, recruiting companions. She obtained letters patent from King Louis XIV. In 1676, Bishop Laval recognized her community as a secular institute. As she set out on a third voyage back to France, the Bishop refused to allow her to recruit further companions from Europe. Upon her return, she began to admit the first Canadian women, including two Iroquois.

Marguerite and her companions taught catechism and basics of literature, as well as virtue, etiquette and the love of work. She started up a needlework workshop and taught household arts to prepare the students for their role in family life. The "*filles du roi*", the so-called "King's Daughters" who came from France with dowries from the king, were welcomed by Marguerite's companions at the Saint-Gabriel Farm, which offered them shelter and welcome as they became acquainted with the eligible men in the colony.

She began to send her companions in pairs to new parishes to start classes for the children of the settlers. In 1697, the Most Reverend Jean-Baptiste de Saint-Vallier, who succeeded François de Laval as Bishop of Quebec in 1685, recognized the community as "daughters of the parish".

Marguerite Bourgeoys died January 12, 1700, and was acclaimed as the "Mother of the Colony". She was canonized on October 31, 1982, by Saint John Paul II.

## **Her Spirituality**

Marguerite Bourgeoys was influenced by the 17th-century French school of spirituality. She shared its sense of the mystical, its orientation toward teaching, and its apostolic aspirations to missionary activity. The spirituality is greatly indebted to Saint Teresa of Avila, the mystic who reformed the Carmelite Order, and to Saint Philip Neri, who promoted a return to the model of the early Church. Other key figures were Saint François de Sales, Cardinal Bérulle, Father Jean-Jacques Ollier, who founded the Sulpicians (the Society of Saint Sulpice), Saint John Eudes, and Saint Vincent de Paul; all promoted reform of the Church in France and proposed to laypersons such as Marguerite the demands of the love of God and the practice of charity toward the poor, without cloister or religious habit.

The love of God and neighbour serves as a summary of Marguerite's life. Just a year before her death, she would write, "It is true that what I have always wanted most, and most ardently desire, is for the great teaching of the love of God above all things and the love of one's neighbour as one would be loved, to be engraved on all hearts." She wanted for her community "the true spirit of hospitality and love which was the glory of the first Christians," when they "were of one heart and mind in God," and "held everything in common."

Marguerite expressed in New France the spirituality that had nourished her in Troyes, honouring in a particular way the visitation of Mary. She sought to be a disciple of Jesus in the same way

Mary was. "She was the Mother and Mistress of the young Church to which she taught many things by word and example, teaching and edification being her principal characteristics," she wrote. "The Holy Virgin was not cloistered, but she maintained an interior solitude and only left it when it was necessary, to express love or to teach others, or to go to the temple. ... She never refused to be present where love or need required a helping hand. She did it in such a way that the poverty and humility that she professed were available to everyone."

A historian of Hôtel-Dieu Hospital wrote that Marguerite had "the character of the strong woman of the Gospel". She was a good businesswoman and a good manager, and promoted a "simple life, without ceremony," a life of hard work like that of the Apostles, which would "owe no one anything," "a simple and measured life" appropriate to her state of poverty. She wrote that she wanted her community to follow Jesus in "the straight and narrow way, poor and humble ... because the more fearlessly I followed him, the more he protected me; the more I do his will, the more he shows me his love." In the face of great spiritual struggle, she wrote, "I have never doubted God's mercy and I shall hope in him when I see myself with one foot in perdition."

#### **For further information:**

##### **Websites:**

<http://www.archivesvirtuelles-cnd.org/en/node/2944>

[http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio.php?id\\_nbr=82](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio.php?id_nbr=82)

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/marguerite-bourgeoys/>

[http://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/liturgy/saints/ns\\_lit\\_doc\\_19821031\\_bourgeoys\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_19821031_bourgeoys_en.html)

<http://saints.sqpn.com/saint-marguerite-bourgeois/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwE6jv47SfY>

<http://cnd-m.org/en/home/>

<http://www.marguerite-bourgeoys.com/en/>

<http://saltandlighttv.org/blog/general/living-ones-joy>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NetrXH2YGzI>

##### **Books:**

*Marguerite Bougeoys and Montreal, 1640-1665*, Patricia Simpson

*Listening to Marguerite Bourgeoys*, Denise Lamarche

##### **Image:**

Portrait of Marguerite Bourgeoys "Pseudo Le Ber"

Jori Smith Palardy, 1962

Collection of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame, Marguerite-Bourgeoys Museum