

Blessed Émilie Tavernier-Gamelin (1800-1851):

The Hope of the Poor

Feast Day: September 24



Her Life

Émilie Tavernier was born in Montreal on February 19, 1800 in an area of Montreal known as the Land of Providence. She was the last of 15 children born to Antoine Tavernier and Marie-Josephte Maurice. When she was four years old, Émilie lost her mother and went to live with her paternal Aunt Marie-Anne, who was married to a successful Montreal businessman named Joseph Perrault. Her father died when she was 15. She went to keep house for her brother François when his wife died three years later. At 20, she was in Quebec, where she spent several months helping a sick relative.

In 1823, Émilie married Jean-Baptiste Gamelin. He was a fruit broker and, as well as sharing his hopes and his love for the poor, Émilie helped in the work. They had three children, but death took two of them shortly after birth and, before long, her husband and the third child had also died. On his deathbed, Jean-Baptiste asked her to take charge of a mentally handicapped young man who had once saved Jean-Baptiste's life. Jean-Baptiste had taken him and his mother in and looked after them.

Alone at 27, far from dwelling on her losses, Émilie turned to works of charity and welcomed the poor and needy people whom she met or who turned up at her door. She opened her house and other residences to them, and gave refuge to many. Elderly women, orphaned children, prisoners, newly arrived immigrants, the unemployed, the hearing impaired, the non-seeing, young people or young couples in difficulty, and physically and intellectually handicapped people – all knew her welcome. Throughout Montreal, people began to refer to her house as the "Refuge of the Poor".

Émilie took an active part in drives and bazars that were held to help the poor get through the Montreal winter. During the troubles of 1837-1838, she was the only person authorized to visit the *patriotes* who were incarcerated at Pied-du-Courant. She prayed with them and brought food, tobacco and letters that people had given to her to deliver to them. Known as the "Angel of the Political Prisoners", she enlisted relatives and friends to help her in the work, and together, in 1841, they formed Providence Shelter. For 15 years, Émilie's acts of charity continued, under the watchful eye of Montreal Bishop Jean-Jacques Lartigue and his successor, Bishop Ignace Bourget. Msgr. Bourget sought to have social services like Émilie's available in every parish in the diocese.

On a trip to Paris in 1841, Bishop Bourget took steps that were aimed at ensuring that the Émilie's work would be established on a permanent footing. He invited the Daughters of Saint Vincent de Paul to help her and to found a religious community in Quebec. Donations for a building poured in, but the French religious were unable to keep their promise and Bishop Bourget was himself obliged to recruit candidates for his new religious community.

By now Émilie had taken private vows and because she wanted to be fully part of the new community, she joined the first religious. She professed first vows and March 29, 1844. The Bishop asked her, the founder, to be the superior of the community. The community had its trials: financial challenges and epidemics, and the malice of one of its members who complained bitterly to the Bishop about the founder.

Mother Gamelin died at 51, of cholera, on September 23, 1851. Her last will was the exhortations her daughters in religion heard from her dying lips: humility, simplicity, charity, above all, charity. Pope (now Saint) John Paul II beatified her on October 2001.

Seven years after its founding, the community of the Sisters of Providence had 50 members. In the first 75 years of the community's existence, over 6000 young women committed themselves to follow Émilie Tavernier-Gamelin. At the time of her beatification, Sisters of Providence could be found in Canada, the United States, Chile, Argentina, Haiti, Cameroon, Egypt, the Philippines, and El Salvador.

Her Spirituality

The spirituality of Émilie Tavernier-Gamelin was characterized by her compassion and concern for the poor. From earliest childhood, her mother had inculcated a habit of helping the poor by confiding in Émilie the job of giving alms to the people who came to the door looking for help. When she was living with her elder brother François, she continued the ministry of compassion. She had a table at the house that was always ready to welcome beggars who came. She called it “The King’s Table”.

Trust in Providence was a characteristic of life in those days. When she was stricken with suffering and in mourning, in fact all her life, Émilie drew inspiration from Mary under the title of Our Lady of Sorrows. Her prayer and her contemplation of the Virgin at the foot of the Cross – an image suggested by her spiritual director while she was in deep mourning for her husband and children – resonated with her deep compassion for people who were suffering.

Without counting the cost, she responded to cries for help; in the needy she discovered the voice, the face, and the will of the Lord. Her faith was lived through the events of everyday life and she relied on Providence to help her find the means to respond. When she begged in hotel kitchens for food to feed the poor, she would make a stop at Notre Dame Church and utter a fervent prayer. Quite often someone would stop her in the street to give an offering that she accepted in answer to her prayer.

Mother Gamelin served the most destitute people in spite of fragile health, often in difficult circumstances, and with few material resources. Her acts of love for the outcast were more than humanitarian gestures; within her Christian service was a desire to bring Christ to those who suffered even as she tried to ease their physical or moral pain. When she initiated her helpers to the service of women whose lives had been difficult, she insisted that they be addressed with respect, and that they be referred to as “Madame” and not something like “old Mrs. X”.

The retreat notes she made as a religious witness to her resolutions. “I am being crushed under the yoke and I feel my incapacity,” she wrote in 1851. “I must start a new way of life. I have to find greater generosity inside myself to be able to be the way Providence is with me.” She always counted on “the goodness and mercy of God” to help her cope with the moral sufferings that her companions caused her, with the attitude of her Bishop, and the character of her ecclesiastical superior, the coadjutor Bishop John Charles Prince. She had a strong character, and far from evoking resentment, she was able to respond to suffering with active charity.

Strength was one of her preeminent virtues. Her spirit of mortification expressed itself not only in the practices of her era, but also and perhaps above all in the patience with which she bore the demands which those in authority imposed her. For example, she was asked to stop wearing a locket containing clippings from the hair of her children. Though she was used to running her own house and living an independent life, she found the strength and the humility to force herself to accept the complexities that characterized the religious life of her time.

When she was living through a period of total interior abandon, coming to grips with a profound spiritual desolation – “little fervor, lots of discouragement, all kinds of temptations, negative

feelings toward certain sisters, being judged unfavourably by them, hardly able to stand myself, thinking that it was useless to work toward my perfection, complete discouragement in all my actions, doing my spiritual exercises only through sheer obedience, and to avoid disedifying members of the community...” – to give herself courage she sent a letter to her sister-in-law and invited her with her brother François to come so they could make a way of the cross with her and go the evening prayer.

Even in the midst of this psychological, interior distress, she did not give in to impatience and accepted others’ harsh judgments of her. Bishop Bourget recognized that he had “made her experience some tough situations in order to purify her virtue.” He made it “a duty for himself to “reveal, after her death, the solid virtues that we hidden in her beautiful soul.”

For further information:

In English:

http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio.php?id_nbr=4212&interval=25

<http://sistersofprovidence.ca/about-us/our-history/>

<http://www.providenceintl.org/en/centre-emilie-gamelin.php>

http://www.providenceintl.org/en/histoire_historique.php

In French:

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89milie_Gamelin

http://www.biographi.ca/fr/bio.php?id_nbr=4212&interval=25

<http://www.providenceintl.org/fr/centre-emilie-gamelin.php>

http://www.providenceintl.org/fr/histoire_historique.php

Image:

Courtesy of Émilie-Gamelin Centre – Museum of the Sisters of Providence (Montreal)