

MARGUERITE BOURGEOYS, WOMAN FOR ALL TIMES



On October 31, 1982 Marguerite Bourgeoys was declared a Saint by Pope John Paul II in a canonization ceremony in Rome. In the years since that memorable date, devotion to Marguerite Bourgeoys has spread throughout the world. In large part, thanks to the increasing ease of access to internet and the numerous religious programs on TV, people living in Argentina, Brazil, Vietnam, Poland, Malaysia, Mexico, the Philippines, Spain, Italy, the United States and Canada, to name some of the countries about which I am aware, have heard of this intrepid woman and wanted to know more. Regularly, here in Montreal at the Marguerite Bourgeoys Chapel and Museum we receive emails and letters from around the world requesting information and religious material about Marguerite. There is no doubt that Marguerite is known and prayed to throughout the world. But, who is this woman that is attracting such interest? What is it that people find so appealing? And, what can a woman who lived over 350 years ago possibly have to say to us today?

WHO IS THIS MARGUERITE BOURGEOYS?

Marguerite was a remarkable woman of faith and vision who was born in Troyes, France, on April 17, 1620 and who later became the first teacher in Ville Marie, (present day Montreal), “Mother of the Colony”, and foundress of the Sisters of the Congregation-de-Notre-Dame.

Marguerite’s life was characterized by unshakeable faith, daring initiative, adaptability, courage, resourcefulness, selfless concern for others, commitment to an ideal, and genuine love of God evidenced in her compassionate love for the men, women and children whose lives she touched. Despite her numerous achievements and the quality of her life, Marguerite was very much a human being. She was a

product of her culture and times, and she shared the common growing pains of all persons.

THE YOUNG MARGUERITE

The child, Marguerite, had to learn to share her parents' love with her brothers and sisters. She was the sixth of 12 children, and everyday living in the Bourgeoys household likely had its share of family squabbles. Household chores, religious devotions, school activities, and taking care of younger brothers and sisters must have been part of Marguerite's life.

As a teenager, Marguerite was a typical young girl, interested in her appearance, concerned about her clothes, and preoccupied with jewelry, lace and frills. The opinion her friends had of her and the public image she conveyed were so important that she refused to join the extern congregation, a lay religious organization of the time, for fear of being considered too holy. In this, Marguerite was like all teenagers who struggle to come to terms with their identity and to find appropriate expression for their religious values.

As Marguerite grew to young womanhood, she wondered what she should do with her life. The Christian atmosphere of her home and her religious upbringing exerted their influence. She sought to know God's will for her in prayer, asked advice, and examined the options. Finally, Marguerite decided to give herself totally to God and to enter a cloistered order of sisters. She applied to a Carmelite convent. Her request was rejected. Naturally, she was disappointed. Once again, she asked to be received into a cloistered community, one of the other cloistered communities located in Troyes. Again, she was refused. Though Marguerite had great faith and recognized these refusals as indications that God had other plans for her, it would be a grave mistake to conclude that Marguerite did not feel the pain of rejection and the disappointment of thwarted plans. For Marguerite, this was a period of confusion and uncertainty about her future.

It was about this time that Marguerite first met de Maisonneuve, the Governor of Ville Marie, a little colony in New France. Marguerite had heard of him from his sister, Mother Louise Chomedey, a member of the Congregation Notre Dame in Troyes. Mother Louise had told Marguerite about the difficulties and hardships of life in the colony and about the work of her brother there. No doubt, Mother Louise had also spoken to her brother about the abilities of Marguerite. This meeting of de Maisonneuve and Marguerite was the beginning of an exciting new venture for Marguerite, one which would call forth all of her human and spiritual resources.

De Maisonneuve was in need of a teacher for the young French children of Ville Marie, and Marguerite was searching to know what God wished her to do with her life. When de Maisonneuve invited Marguerite to come to Ville Marie to assume responsibility for education in the Colony, it seemed like an answer to Marguerite's prayer. The project enticed her; the invitation seemed like a clear call, and she had the backing of the Sisters in Troyes who knew her and recommended her for this great mission. Despite this, Marguerite proceeded with care. She had had her previous disappointments, and she wanted to be sure about this decision. Only after she had prayed and consulted her spiritual director, Father Jendret and several other persons, did she decide to accept the invitation. Marguerite agreed to accompany de Maisonneuve back to New France and to set up school there. On first glance, this does not seem such a noteworthy feat. Only when one considers what living in the garrison community of Ville Marie in the 1650's must have entailed, can one begin to appreciate the courage and daring of this young woman.

Determined and resolute lady that she was, Marguerite wasted no time in preparing for her new life in Ville Marie. She took care of such practical matters as making her will and leaving her share of the

heritage to her brothers and sisters. Afraid of an unfavourable reaction from family and friends, she postponed telling them about her plans until the last moment. She had been right about their reaction. Her relatives tried to persuade her to forget the whole idea, pointing out how foolish it would be of her to leave home for the god forsaken land in the new world. Behind her back, people whispered about her and questioned the intentions of this single woman.

When everything seemed settled for her departure for Ville Marie, Marguerite received an unexpected letter from the Carmelite monastery, inviting her to join their religious community. The letter threw Marguerite into turmoil. Should she abandon her plans to go to New France? Did God really wish her to be a Carmelite after all? As always, when faced with a problem, Marguerite prayed for guidance and sought advice. Assured in her prayer of the validity of her choice for Ville Marie, Marguerite set off on her journey.

MARGUERITE, PIONEER WOMAN

The decision to leave France was one thing; the living out of that decision was a continuous challenge to Marguerite's faith, courage and perseverance. A quick glance at some of the situations she had to face gives us some inkling of the physical and emotional stamina which Marguerite possessed.

- Marguerite, like all persons leaving home and setting out for the unknown, must have felt the pain of saying goodbye to family and friends. Much as she was sure that God was asking her to make this journey, she must have experienced some anxiety as she faced the unknown.
- Travelling through France on route to Nantes to board the ship, Marguerite witnessed the ravages of war and sickness. She saw bodies piled high by the roadside and felt the misery of death and war and the plague.
- Sea travel at the time was perilous, long, and difficult, and many times marked by sickness and death. Marguerite crossed the ocean 6 more times after her initial trip from France to Ville Marie, often doing without water and a proper place to sleep.
- Once in the new colony, Marguerite was confronted with its physical hardships. With others, she endured the long cold winters, the cramped living quarters of the fort, the scarcity of food and provisions. Life was hard, and simple tasks demanded much effort.
- Not only were the hardships physical, Marguerite's new life also brought its share of emotional hardships: loneliness, isolation, fear of attack from the Iroquois, loss and grief ensuing from the fires which destroyed buildings and took the lives of two young promising sisters.
- The establishing of a new, non-cloistered religious community in Ville Marie called for all of Marguerite's patience, hope and perseverance. The process took time, and, like all new ventures, this new Congregation had to be tried and proven before receiving ecclesiastical and civil approval. Marguerite learned to wait patiently and persevere in the midst of lack of understanding and support from some of the ecclesial authorities.
- Marguerite also had her spiritual trials. Accused of living in a state of sin by Sister Tardy, one of her own sisters, and blamed for not being sufficiently strict, Marguerite began to question her behaviour of the past and wondered whether her laxity had been responsible for some of the calamities of the day. Marguerite tells us that she lived in this spirit of darkness for 50 months, during which time she felt little fervour for God.

- Growing old, a very real part of the human condition, brings its own challenges, and Marguerite was not spared these. It was in the infirmary that this courageous woman, leader and innovator, lived out her last days. Here, as she embraced her own physical diminishment, she sat watching humbly as others planned and set the future course for the Congregation with little concern for opinions or ideas.

Many more incidents could be cited to illustrate the courage and strength of this woman from Troyes, but these examples give us some idea of the character of this woman, Marguerite. In all of the challenges and difficulties that Marguerite met throughout her life, it was her strong faith, steadfast hope and complete trust in Divine Providence that supported her and gave her the strength she needed.

MARGUERITE, FIRST TEACHER OF VILLE MARIE

Marguerite had come to Ville Marie to teach the children. Having gained experience in France and been versed in the educational tradition of Peter Fourier, she was well qualified, but it was to be five years before there were children in Ville Marie for Marguerite to teach.

Marguerite opened the first school in 1658 in an abandoned stone stable which had been given to her by de Maisonneuve. The curriculum combined the practical with the ideal. Marguerite recognized the importance of preparing the children's spiritual life, but she also knew the necessity of making them capable and efficient at the tasks of everyday life. Marguerite's school was inclusive; education was free for all the children, boys and girls. From the very beginning, the children were taught Religion, Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Singing, and Household Arts. Given that at this time in France, people were still disputing the usefulness of teaching girls to write, Marguerite's vision of education was very progressive.

Marguerite's talents and innovative spirit were not bound by the confines of the stable school. Within a few years she had established a school for Indians, an Indian Mission, a boarding school for the daughters of the growing merchant class in the colony, and a "vocational school" for the poor.

MARGUERITE, "MOTHER OF THE COLONY"

Perhaps, it is this title, "Mother of the Colony" which most reveals the personality of Marguerite. Though she was a woman of strength and courage and lived an austere life, the hardships and difficulties she endured did not make her cold or bitter. Rather, Marguerite's warmth and welcoming personality were such that the early colonists easily turned to her for comfort and help in their difficulties.

Marguerite's heart went out in a special way to "les Filles du Roi", the young kings' wards sent from France to be the future wives in the colony. Marguerite took these girls into her care. She welcomed them, housed them, and taught them to cook, sew, and keep house, thus preparing them for their new life as pioneer women and wives. It is not hard to imagine the loneliness, discouragement and fears of these young girls. Many tears must have been shed in those early days, and it was Marguerite to whom they turned for comfort. Many a young woman must have cried on Marguerite's shoulder and been consoled by the depth of her love and concern. Marguerite protected these girls, educated them, and prepared them for marriage. It was she who frequently witnessed their marriages, as the archives of Montreal attest, and later she would be the godmother for some of their children.

One can be sure that the young wives did not easily forget the woman who had been so good to them. History attests to the fact that they continued to go to Marguerite for help whenever difficulties arose, but Marguerite also had her friends among the young men of the colony. On her first ship voyage to Ville

Marie, she had cared for many of them who had fallen sick with the plague. Later, when the hardships of life in the colony became too great, these men remembered the tenderness and compassion of the young woman who had nursed them back to health. They knew that they could go to Marguerite and that she would listen to their problems, encourage them, and send them home, confident in their ability to survive.

Yes, Marguerite was kind and compassionate. She responded compassionately to all who came to her in need of help, and repeatedly, she put the needs of others before her own. True as this is, is it not likely that Marguerite had to deal with her own struggles as well? Would she not also have had her own moments of loneliness and discouragement? Would fatigue and worry not have burdened her?

MARGUERITE, WOMAN OF FAITH AND HOPE

Much has been said about the person of Marguerite, and one might well ask, what made this woman so special? What was it that gave her the impetus and strength to live as she did and to be the person she was?

The answer is very simple. Marguerite had unshakable faith and dauntless hope. Her love for God was boundless, and her whole life was lived in response to what she believed was God's will for her. Marguerite's trust in God and confidence in Mary was absolute. Once she believed she was doing what God wanted, she never hesitated. She was sure God would care for her. "If this is the work of God, I shall want for nothing", she explained.

It was this love of God and neighbour that made Marguerite dedicate herself to the project of the Montreal Company's purpose in settling in Canada, the founding in the New World of a Christianity which would imitate the purity and charity of the primitive Church.

This same faith and hope maintained her vision and dream of founding a non-cloistered religious community, dedicated to Mary and destined for education. It was only in 1698, two years before her death, that she finally obtained ecclesiastical approval for her non-cloistered teaching Congregation, one of the first in the Church.

SAINT MARGUERITE BOURGEOYS

Though Marguerite died in 1700, her life continues to inspire people in different walks of life in all parts of the world. Today, more than ever, we need role models, men and women who have gone before us witnessing to a life lived to the full, persons who pursued their goals courageously with patience and perseverance, in spite of all the obstacles that presented themselves. We need the witness of persons of integrity who cared about the common good, whose lives were characterized by love and compassion for others, who believed in God, trusted in God's provident care, and hoped in the promise of a better world. Marguerite was just such a person! We need her and the example of her life. The difficulties we face are different from the ones Marguerite encountered, but the demands for love, self-sacrifice, courage, faith and hope are the same. Who better to help us in our struggles to create a more humane world than this pioneer woman of Ville Marie, Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys of Canada?

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