

## MARGUERITE BOURGEOYS: AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

### Her origins

Marguerite Bourgeoys was born in Troyes in the Champagne region of France on 17 April 1620, the seventh of thirteen children in the family. At the age of twenty, Marguerite's young life was changed forever. During a procession, she found herself deeply moved at the sight of a statue of the Blessed Virgin. She decided to give her life to the service of God with little idea of what her gift would imply. Marguerite then tried to enter religious life but was refused. She joined the ranks of the *Congrégation Notre-Dame de Troyes* as an extern member and taught poor children for several years in the city of Troyes. Marguerite even became the leader of this group of close to 400 laywomen who like her had devoted themselves to the service of the poor and destitute.

At 32 years of age, a meeting with Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve, the Governor of Montreal who was then in France, was another turning point in her life. M. de Maisonneuve was looking for a lay teacher for the children of the colonists and the natives in Ville-Marie. Marguerite Bourgeoys accepted his offer and joined the hundred men of the *Grand Recrue* of 1653 who were engaged to ensure the survival of the colony.

### Her accomplishments

#### Notre-Dame de Bon-Secours Chapel

On her arrival, Marguerite found a young colony that could hardly even be considered a little village. Since there were not yet any children of school age, she devoted her time to a rather special project. At the time, Ville-Marie had just one place of pilgrimage: the site of the cross on Mount Royal. It was difficult for Montrealers to make frequent visits there because of its distance from the settlement, the frequent Iroquois raids and the rigors of winter. Marguerite proposed to build a chapel of pilgrimage just beyond the enclosure of the fort. Despite the numerous difficulties that delayed the realization of her dream, Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel was completed in 1678.

#### Montreal's first school

During this time, the young colony was expanding and children were becoming more and more numerous. In 1658, M. de Maisonneuve, the Governor, gave her a stone stable at the centre of the village. Marguerite cleaned it out and used it to open Montreal's first school. Before long, the teacher needed help with the education of the children. She returned to France and found four companions to join her. The community life they led at the time was the basis for the religious community she founded. Marguerite Bourgeoys did not stop at teaching the children; she also saw to the education of older women. She began a trade school to provide young women with the manual skills that would allow them to earn a living. Marguerite Bourgeoys also began travelling teaching missions outside Montreal along the Saint Lawrence River. The education that Marguerite Bourgeoys and her companions provided was free to all.

#### The Congrégation de Notre-Dame

Marguerite looked for women who wanted to give their lives to God as she did while working within their community. Up until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the cloister had been the only option available

to women who wished to join a religious community. By forming the Congrégation de Notre-Dame de Montréal, Marguerite established in New France what remained unthinkable, or rare at the very least, in Europe. But gaining official recognition for her community would involve a serious struggle with authorities on both sides of the Atlantic. The community did not depend on dowries for its survival; it was financially independent and survived on the income from its farm and from the work of its members.

Marguerite was not only a woman of intelligence; she was also a woman with a heart. As such, she was a vital member of the early colony. She became the godmother of several children in Ville-Marie and got to know the hopes and aspirations of many of the *Filles du Roy* when she opened her house and her farm to them to make them welcome.

In 1700, Marguerite Bourgeoys died in Montreal at the age of 79. At the moment of her death, the Congrégation de Notre-Dame had welcomed into its ranks women of various origins: French, Canadian, First Nations and English. On the day after her death, a priest wrote, "If saints were canonized today as in olden times by the voice of the people and of the clergy, tomorrow we would celebrate the Mass of Saint Marguerite of Canada." Almost three centuries later, in 1982, the Vatican canonized her, recognizing the work of this great woman. And so, she became Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys.

An artist by the name of Pierre Le Ber painted a deathbed portrait of Marguerite Bourgeoys. This painting, the oldest by a Canadian painter, is on display at the Marguerite Bourgeoys Museum. Located in Old Montreal beside Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel, this lovely museum offers visitors the opportunity to learn the history of Montreal's first stone chapel and the story of its fascinating founder, a woman who shared pioneer values of courage, devotion and tenacity with the first colonists.

### **A continuing presence**

Today the work of Marguerite Bourgeoys is very much alive. The Congrégation de Notre-Dame continues the educational and apostolic work of its founder. Over the years, the community established houses beyond its original borders so that today the sisters of the Congregation can be found in almost all Canadian provinces and in the United States. As well, many foreign missions have grown up in countries such as Japan, Cameroon, Central America and France.

In a touching ceremony in April 2005, along with the members of her community, Montrealers brought the mortal remains of Marguerite Bourgeoys to Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours to the very heart of the neighbourhood where she had lived, worked and died. This woman of courage, vision and compassion remains an example and an inspiration to us all. And thus, Marguerite Bourgeoys has returned to her chapel in Old Montreal, the neighbourhood where she was known and loved by all. Her remains lie under the left side-altar of the chapel.