

## A CHAPEL AT THE HEART OF A CITY

### Marguerite Bourgeoys' historic chapel

1655: Montreal rises laboriously from the forest floor to the sound of swinging axes. This city dedicated to the Blessed Virgin will one day be beautiful and prosperous. That is the pledge of its founders, drawn here by faith and the dream of a better world. One of them, Marguerite Bourgeoys, a modest and endearing woman, will give the city its first stone chapel – Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours.

Marguerite Bourgeoys arrived in Ville-Marie in 1653 at the invitation of the governor, Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve, to open the first school. While waiting for the children to reach the school age, she began the work of realizing another dream: the construction of a chapel of pilgrimage dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, accessible to the colonists just a short distance outside the settlement. Marguerite's enthusiasm was hard to resist and everyone in the small settlement became involved in the project.

In 1657, Montreal was transformed from a mission to a parish. It was now under the direction of the Sulpicians who arrived from France to take charge when the Jesuits withdrew to continue their missionary work among the Native Peoples. The foundations of the chapel were taking shape but Father de Queylus, Superior of the priests serving Notre-Dame, had the work suspended. Work on the stone chapel resumed only in 1675 and was completed in 1678. Meanwhile, Marguerite had a little shelter built over the foundations where people would go to pray.

On her second trip to France (1670-1672), Marguerite Bourgeoys received the little statue of Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours from Pierre Chevrier, Baron de Fancamp, one of the members of the *Société de Notre-Dame de Montréal* responsible for funding the Montreal project. Already, he said, many people had obtained favours or cures when praying before this statue. In 1673, Marguerite had the statue placed in the little shelter.

In 1754, Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel perished in the flames. One consolation: the wooden statue of Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours and its reliquary were found the next day among the burning embers. For a community badly affected by France's wars with Britain, there was little question of rebuilding the chapel. It was as much as the people could do to sustain themselves, faced with inflationary costs and lack of supplies. In 1760, the British took over Montreal. When the new regime wanted to construct barracks for the garrison in 1766 on the spot sheltering the ruins of the old chapel, however, the Sulpicians and the *Fabrique* of Notre-Dame announced their intention of rebuilding the chapel. Influential citizens gathered subscriptions to finance the project. In 1771, the construction of the chapel as we know it today began.

### Cradle of the English-speaking Catholic community

As years passed, a number of the officers of the British army and their families, many of them Irish and Scottish Catholics, began to attend services at the chapel. And so, alongside names like Viger and Papineau are found Selby, Smith, Doyle, Taylor and McDonald. The little chapel was now the birthplace of the English-speaking Catholic community. The Sulpicians assigned Jackson John Richards to take charge of their spiritual welfare. From 1815 until he died bringing spiritual comfort to the victims of the typhus epidemic that affected Montreal in 1847, he served the English-Catholic community. In fact, it was from this community that subscriptions were solicited to begin construction of Saint Patrick's, Montreal's first English-speaking parish.

## **Immigrants, typhus and a bishop's initiatives**

When typhus spread among Montrealers with the arrival of immigrants in fever ships in 1847, the city mobilized to fight the disease. Bishop Ignace Bourget was himself afflicted, as was the mayor of the city, John Easton Mills, who did not recover. In praying for his own recovery and the lifting of the plague from the city, the bishop made three promises: to restore the practice of pilgrimage to Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours, to present the chapel with a new statue to replace the little statue of Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours stolen in 1831 and to commission a votive painting for the chapel to commemorate the typhus epidemic. The bishop lived, the epidemic diminished and Bishop Bourget fulfilled his promises. He issued a pastoral letter supporting the Sulpicians in renewing pilgrimages to Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours. At the end of an evening procession the following May, the *Vierge dorée* was given a place of honour in the chapel.

*Le typhus* (circa 1849) by Théophile Hamel was presented to the chapel as a votive offering, fulfilling the bishop's final promise to commemorate the epidemic. The painting can be found on the ceiling under the choir loft.

Bishop Bourget added one last honour to the little chapel in the autumn of 1848. He decided to replace the old picture of Mary on the wall of the sacristy facing the port with a statue by Charles Dauphin to be called *Star of the Sea*. The statue was placed on the roof of the chapel and overlooked the port until it was replaced in 1893. It is on display in the crypt of the museum.

## **The Sailors' Church**

Another event in the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the history of the chapel. At the end of the struggle to keep Garibaldi from seizing the Papal States, Pope Pius IX surrendered to prevent a bloodbath. As the Montreal contingents of Papal Zouaves were returning from Europe, their ship, the *Idaho*, was battered by fierce storms and they thought they would die. "But", in the words of one of their number, Philip Bleau, "Notre-Dame de Bon Secours to whom we prayed protected us. We promised her an ex-voto and a visit to her church as soon as we reached home." Thus began a tradition of the small sailing ships that hang from the ceiling of the chapel. The Zouaves fulfilled their promise and, sometimes after a pilgrimage to the chapel accompanied by Bishop Bourget, they presented a miniature silver ship commemorating the *Idaho* as a memorial. Other sailors who prayed at the chapel took up the idea; their votive ships and their attachment to the chapel have earned Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours the title of *The Sailors' Church*.

## **Marks of esteem and love**

The little chapel on Saint Paul Street has undergone many changes throughout the years, signs of affection of generations who have insisted on leaving some mark on it, from the little boats and the metal hearts hanging from its walls to the statuaries of La Perle and Guardo, Beaulieu's windows, the paintings of Ozias Leduc and the communion rail with its bronze doors signed T. Carli. The 1950s brought about additional changes both structural and artistic, as well as the celebration of the beatification of its founder and the opening of the little museum named after her. The statue of Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours, lost in 1831, recovered in 1844 and treasured carefully at the Mother House by the Congrégation de Notre-Dame, was permanently returned to the chapel in 1988.

In the final years of the twentieth century, major transformations were completed, uncovering the beauty of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century work of Édouard Meloche on the wooden vault of the chapel, restoring the exterior walls and unearthing the remains of the precious foundations of Marguerite Bourgeoys' stone chapel of 1678 and a surprising number of First Nations artefacts in the

basement of the building. The little museum dedicated to the life and work of Marguerite Bourgeoys was enlarged to display artefacts found on the archaeological site and to present the history of the chapel and the surrounding neighbourhood. The official re-opening of the chapel took place on 24 May 1998 with a solemn Mass celebrated by Cardinal Jean-Claude Turcotte. In 2001, the Casavant organ (1910) was restored.

### **Celebrating a life lived for others**

September 21, 2003, was a day of rejoicing to celebrate the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Marguerite Bourgeoys' arrival in Montreal. Cardinal Jean-Claude Turcotte celebrated a solemn Mass, the Port of Montreal offered a replica of a container ship to underscore the continuing connection between the chapel and the port, and visitors streamed through the chapel and the museum all day long.

Marguerite Bourgeoys, the "Mother of the Colony", returned home on 24 April 2005. Her mortal remains were transferred from the seventh Mother House of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame to Bon-Secours chapel in Old Montreal where she had lived as a beloved friend and valued counsellor to all. Her remains have been placed in the left side-altar below the statue of Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours. A few weeks later, the remains of Jeanne Le Ber, the recluse of Montreal, were moved to the chapel and interred in the lateral wall on the east side of the chapel.