

St. Marguerite Bourgeoys

Feast: January 12



Facts

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Marguerite had survived many threats in the twenty-six years she had been in wilderness of Canada. She had lived through Iroquois attacks, a fire that destroyed her small village, plagues on the ships that she took back and forth to France, but nothing threatened her dreams and hopes more than what her own bishop said to her in 1679. He told her that she had to join her Congregation of Notre Dame with its teaching sisters to a cloistered religious order of Ursulines. This was not the first time she'd heard this command. Whether from a misplaced desire to protect her Sisters or from discomfort in dealing with an active religious order of women, bishops had long wanted to fit her into the usual mold of cloistered orders.

But Marguerite had overcome many challenges to get to this day and was not deterred. In her own native France, she had belonged to a sodality of women who cared for the sick.

The stories of hardships and dangers in Montreal that made other people shiver had awakened a call from God in her to serve the Native Americans and settlers who endured this adversity. She met with the governor of what was then called Ville Marie and convinced him she was the person he was looking for to help start a school for the children of Montreal.

When she arrived in Ville Marie, as it was called then, she found that few children survived to school age. She helped the remarkable Jeanne Mance, who ran the hospital, to change this tragedy. When she finally had children to teach, she had to set up school in a stable.

So she was not ready to surrender to the bishop. There was too much at stake. She reminded him that the Ursulines because they were cloistered could not go out and teach, as her Sisters had done. The poor and uneducated would not and could not travel to a Quebec cloister over miles of frontier at the risk of their lives.

But her Sisters were more than willing to live in huts in order to fulfill their call from God. She had set up schools all over the territory, not just for children. When the king, in well-meaning ignorance, had sent untrained orphans over to be colonists she had set up a school for the women to teach them how to survive and thrive in Canada.

How could they do the work for God that they had done so well in a cloister?

The bishop replied, "I cannot doubt, Mother Bourgeoys, that you will succeed in moving heaven and earth as you have moved me!" The Congregation remained an active teaching order, one of the very first of its kind for women. Their rule had to go through one more attempt at turning them into a cloister but Marguerite lived to see the triumph when their Rule was made official in 1698. She was canonized in 1982 by Pope John Paul II.

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