

Saint Marguerite d'Youville (1701-1771)

Mother of the Poor

Feast day: October 16



Her Life

Marie-Marguerite Dufrost de Lajemmerais was born in Varennes, Quebec, on October 15, 1701. Her father had come from Brittany, France in 1687. Her mother was the daughter of a military officer from Carignan, Quebec, who had been governor of the settlement at Trois-Rivières. Marguerite's mother's brother was the explorer Pierre de la Vérendrye. The eldest of six children, Marguerite was only seven years old when her father died. There were hard times for the family because her mother had to wait six years before she began receiving the officers' widows' pension.

Thanks to the help of her great-grandfather, Pierre Boucher, Marguerite was able to study at the Ursuline boarding school for girls in Quebec City for two years. At 12, she returned to her family to help teach her brothers and sisters. On August 12, 1722, she married François d'Youville. A fur and alcohol trader, he was unreliable and rather selfish. He died in 1730, leaving Marguerite, who was pregnant for the sixth time, with two living children and a lot of debt.

In 1737, she rented a house in Montreal where she gave hospitality to women in need. She and three companions made private religious vows. Because they broke social barriers by taking in the needy, the women were scorned, slandered and persecuted. Marguerite was accused of trafficking in alcohol with the First Nations people as her husband had done, with, it was said, the collaboration of the Sulpicians. She was accused of drunkenness and even prostitution.

In 1747, Marguerite was put in charge of the administration of the Charon Brothers Hospital. When her term was up in 1750, she wrote to France for help and offered to pay the hospital's debts. The King, Louis XV, confirmed her as director of the hospital on June 3, 1753, and authorized her to form a religious community which was approved by the Most Rev. Henri-Marie de Pontbriand, Bishop of Quebec, in 1755.

To meet the financial needs of the hospital, Marguerite used her administrative talents and started up various activities such as needlework, dressmaking and tailoring, and the manufacture of military flags, clothing for Native people, hosts and candles. She also ran a tavern, sold tobacco, lime, building materials, and sand. The hospital welcomed a wide variety of people, including the poor, epileptics, lepers, battered women, and sick priests. During the wars leading up to the Conquest of 1760, her door was open to prisoners, the sick and the wounded of both sides. Beginning in 1754, Mother d'Youville also took in abandoned children.

In 1765, the General Hospital burned down. It took four years, but she got it rebuilt. On December 9 and 13, 1771, she had attacks of paralysis and she died on December 23. She was canonized on December 9, 1990 by Pope (now Saint) John Paul II.

Her Spirituality

With the Ursulines, Marguerite grew in the practice of the apostolic prayer of Marie of the Incarnation who had founded the girls' school in Quebec City a century earlier. Marguerite wrote: "It is by the Heart of my Jesus, my Way, my Truth, and my Life, that I approach you, O eternal Father." She was intelligent and she had good judgment and a well-developed sense of responsibility. She was convinced that the "the cross was the sign of love by which the Father of Mercy brought his elect into conformity with his Son." She was strong and hard-working and she was a teacher who "knew how to be respected and how to be loved."

When she was 27, her heart broken by the scandalous life of her husband, she was struck by the revelation of God's personal love for her. Her spiritual life became one of trust in, and abandon to, divine Providence. After his death, she had to provide for her family while his estate was settled. At the same time, she visited the poor, the prisoners and the sick, and begged for funds to provide a proper burial for criminals who had died.

In 1737, still looking after her children, she formed with three companions an association of "young women, secular in habits, but religious in their hearts" who consecrated themselves "in perpetuity to the service of the poor." In the memoir that she wrote in 1752, she said, "Providence and our hard work are the resources we count on to carry on the work." She took in "found" children in order "to preserve them body and soul, to offer them a Christian education and help them prepare to earn an honest living." After a fire, which destroyed her building in 1765, she and her Sisters prayed the *Te Deum* and said, "The Lord gave us everything, the Lord has taken everything away, may his Name be praised forever." At the end of her life, she said, "We have always been on the verge of losing everything, but we have always had what we needed."

The Rule of the Institute recommends "seeing Christ in the person of the poor who have the honour of being incorporated in Him." Poverty, humility and submission did not erase awareness of understanding the humaneness. Marguerite asked each of her Sisters "to make known her needs, without hiding her infirmities, and not to undertake anything that would damage her health." Within the community, she wanted "perfect union, with one heart and one soul, always

considerate and supportive of each other in our weakness, knowing that we need a greater love to bear our own.” To obtain that, the Sisters should “draw from the Divine Paternity the feelings of love, tender solicitude, and compassion that will sustain them in helping the poor, the sick and the orphan.”

Marguerite d’Youville’s spirituality can be summed up in three words: “Father, Providence, Poor”. Her love was universal and adapted itself so well to every kind of distress, that it was common for people to say, “Go to the Grey Nuns. They will never refuse to help you.”

For further information:

English

http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_19901209_youville_en.html
<http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio.php?Bioid=35988>
<http://www.sgm.qc.ca/en/home/>

French

http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_19901209_youville_fr.html
<http://www.biographi.ca/fr/bio.php?Bioid=35988>
<http://www.sgm.qc.ca/fr/accueil/>

Image:

“Mother d’Youville teaching the Catechism in Châteauguay in 1766” 1942, by Flore Barrette, sgm [1897-1984]. Courtesy of the Grey Nuns of Montreal (1974-A-092).