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A  
Tercentenary Sketch  
of the  
Venerable Marguerite Bourgeoys  
1620 - 1920



The  
Venerable Marguerite Bourgeoys  
Foundress of the  
Congregation de Notre-Dame  
of Montreal  
1620-1920



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Nihil obstat:

Marianopoli 6 februarii 1920

E. HÉBERT, *censor librorum*.

SA GRANDEUR Mgr G. GAUTHIER,  
Evêque de Philippopolis.

## FOREWORD

*On April 17th, 1920, three hundred years will have elapsed since Marguerite Bourgeoys, the first school-teacher of Montreal, was born at Troyes, France.*

*The purpose of the following sketch is to spread devotion to this Apostle of Education whose virtues have been declared heroic by Christ's Vicar on earth. May her claims to the veneration of all dwellers on our great North American Continent be more widely recognized and her name more frequently invoked in order that, when God so wills, she may be publicly honored throughout the Catholic World'*

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*This brief life is published with complete submission to the decrees of Pope Urban VIII; nor does the author wish to forestall by any word or phrase, the decisions of the Holy See in the Cause of Venerable Mother Bourgeoys' Beatification.*

## OUR PASSION-FLOWER

In sunny France, one April day,  
Three hundred years ago,  
God's Holy Church, in grief's array,  
Was chanting sad and low;

For 'twas that Friday called the " Good ",  
When Life was crucified,  
And sinners bowed before the rood  
Whereon their Savior died.

Then God in mercy gave to earth  
A Passion Flower fair . . .  
A virgin soul of wondrous worth,  
A Pearl beyond compare!

In Calvary's soil that flower grew,  
Close by the Blood-stained Tree,  
And from the piercé Heart it drew  
The glow of charity.

Borne by the Master's zeal divine  
Across the deep she sped,  
To make Christ's blessed Faith outshine  
On souls in error dead.

Lord Jesus, deign our prayers to hear,  
What Mary asks, canst Thou withhold? . . .  
That Mother Marguerite's name so dear  
Be mid Thy saints enrolled.

MARGUERITE BOURGEOYS  
FOUNDRRESS OF THE CONGREGATION DE  
NOTRE-DAME OF MONTREAL  
1620—1700

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Marguerite Bourgeoys' parents, Abraham Bourgeoys, an honest merchant of moderate means, and Guillemette Garnier, a typical Christian wife and mother, were townspeople of Troyes in the French province known as "La Champagne." The child who was born and baptized on Good Friday, April 17th 1620, was endowed with unusual gifts. Intelligent, ardent, docile, with a supernatural instinct for humility and mortification, she was one of those chosen souls set apart by the Master for a special work in His Vineyard.

From her earliest years she loved to gather together her little companions for

work and prayer, in unconscious imitation of a religious community. At the age of twelve, she was left to replace her beloved mother as mistress of the house and teacher of the two younger children.

Later in life, Marguerite Bourgeoys accused herself of having, in those youthful days, given too much thought to her personal appearance. A light from Heaven at once revealed this weakness to her and freed her from it forever.

On Rosary Sunday, 1640, she took part in the solemn procession held to honor the Blessed Virgin. As she passed the old Abbey of Notre Dame aux Nonnains, she paused to salute the statue above its portal. At that moment, Mary's image suddenly transfigured, cast upon the kneeling girl a look of wondrous love. That brief vision raised Marguerite Bourgeoys to new heights of sanctity; thenceforth, she lived only for God and souls. Drawn by divine grace, she strove to follow the mysterious call that



sounded within her heart. Her first step was to join a sodality whose members met at stated times for prayer and good works; and her zeal and fervor soon won for her the position of President. Again love of Our Lady inspired her to seek admission first, into the Carmelite Order, then, into that of the Poor Clares. Providence allowed that both applications should be rejected.

In 1643, with her Confessor's approval, she bound herself to God's Service by the double vow of poverty and chastity. Directed and encouraged by the same good priest, Monsieur Jendret, she attempted to found in the Blessed Virgin's honor, an order for the instruction of young girls. Another failure was the only visible result. About the same time, her dear father died, cheered to the last by his daughter's devoted care. Meanwhile, the Divine Master mingled spiritual consolations with her trials. Holy Communion became a source of heavenly joys. On the feast of the As-

sumption, 1650, as she prayed before the Blessed Sacrament exposed, Our Lord manifested Himself to her under the form of a beautiful little Child. Divine love then took complete possession of her heart. She was ready for any sacrifice. The time had come for the revelation of God's Will to the soul which He had thus gradually prepared.

In 1653, Paul de Maisonneuve, Governor of the newly founded Canadian colony of Ville Marie, came to Troyes to see his sister, a religious of the Congregation de Notre Dame. The latter with her companions pleaded earnestly to have an active share in evangelizing the New World. De Maisonneuve declined the services of a cloistered order. The nuns then suggested taking with them the President of their Sodality, whose virtues and practical ability would be invaluable to the new settlement. When, at the Governor's request, Mademoiselle Bourgeoys was summoned to meet him, she cried out in amazement: " This is the man

I have seen three times in my dreams: I am to labor with him for God and souls." On his part, de Maisonneuve's keen glance detected the sterling worth of the acquaintance thus strangely made. A few questions were asked and answered, and Marguerite Bourgeoys agreed, if the project were approved by her spiritual advisers, to cross the ocean and teach the children of Ville Marie.

After three days of prayerful deliberation, Monsieur Jendret and the others consulted by Marguerite Bourgeoys and de Maisonneuve, decided that her call to Canada came from God. The Blessed Virgin herself spoke the decisive word. The incident is thus related in Venerable Mother Bourgeoys' Memoirs; "One morning, being wide awake, I saw before me a Lady dressed in white serge, who said to me: 'Go, and I will not forsake thee,' I knew it was the Blessed Virgin, and I was greatly reassured." A message soon came from Paris, whence Monsieur de Maisonneuve wrote, asking

his married sister, Madame de Choly, to meet him there and to take Sister Bourgeoys with her. Concealing her plans from all save a few intimate friends, the latter set out without money or luggage, trusting blindly to Providence for all future needs. In Paris, she gave up all her worldly goods to her brother and sister, and then continued her journey to Nantes. From Saint Nazaire she set sail for Canada on July 20th, 1653. During the long crossing, sickness broke out on board the St. Nicholas. Sister Bourgeoys labored night and day beside the sick and the dying, taught catechism to the soldiers and sailors, and recited public prayers morning and night throughout the sixty days of the tedious voyage. At last, Quebec was reached on the 22d of September 1653, and the arrival of the colonists was greeted with a glad *Te Deum*.

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II

Almost two months later, (November 16th) de Maisonneuve and his companions landed at Ville Marie. Four years elapsed before a school could be opened. During that interval, Sister Bourgeoys made herself "all things to all men in order to save all". (1. Cor. IX. 22). Not only did she nurse the sick, console the afflicted, teach catechism from house to house, wash and mend for the poor and for soldiers, but she was also de Maisonneuve's adviser in the affairs of Ville Marie, then a precarious outpost constantly exposed to Iroquois raids. At last her heart's desire was accomplished. In a poor stone stable given by the Governor, she opened her first school on April 30th, 1657. On the feast of the Visitation, July 2d, 1658, she founded a sodality for young girls. Unable to continue the work alone, she crossed over to France, and after a long and arduous journey, re-

turned with four companions. In spite of untold poverty, uninterrupted toil, and continual danger of attacks from fierce Indians, the heroic task of the pioneer educators was successfully carried on. Children were received at a very early age: the first of Mother Bourgeoys' charges was not yet five years old. A few little Indian girls were adopted, baptized, and educated by the Sisters. For several years, both boys and girls were taught in their schools. In order to provide for the instruction of the well-to-do colonists, a boarding-school was opened where for many years nearly all the young girls of Ville Marie and the surrounding country were taught. Great attention was given, not only to religious and secular education, but also to manual training. What is known as "Domestic Economy", "Domestic Science," or "Household Science," was a favorite item of Mother Bourgeoys' curriculum. The poorer children were gathered into an Industrial School,

where they were taught how to work and how to sanctify manual labor by prayer. This establishment was praised by the Governor, who recommended it to the French Minister of Marine. When young girls were sent out from France, Mother Bourgeoys forestalling a favorite work of modern philanthropists, met them at the harbour, took them to a house prepared for that purpose, and kept them under her care until they were settled in homes of their own. Nor did she hesitate to help them in the choice of suitable partners, nor to affix her small, neat signature to Marriage Contracts signed in the convent parlor. To aid and encourage former pupils, closed retreats were often held during which women of all ages came to renew the fervor of their early days and to find fresh strength for the struggle of life. In the midst of an existence thus actively devoted to God's service, Marguerite Bourgeoys' soul grew in recollection, humility and penance.. She made

her scanty meals an occasion of continual mortification. Her bed was the bare ground; her pillow, a block of wood. Her brief rest was interrupted by hours of prayer. Her body was torn by frequent disciplines, and she wore on her head a cap lined with pin points. She prayed most fervently for sinners. Monsieur Souart, her director, called her "the little St. Genevieve of Canada," asserting that her prayers were a safeguard for the entire colony. In spite of these austerities, there was nothing stern or repelling in a demeanor that drew hearts to God by its attractive holiness.

In 1667, the people of Ville Marie, with the approval of Monsieur de Courcelles, Governor of Canada, drew up a petition begging the King to grant Letters Patent to the Congregation de Notre Dame. Mgr. de Laval, Bishop of Quebec, added a warm recommendation. On the advice of her counsellors, Mother Bourgeoys decided to present the petition in person, and thus



ensure the future of her community. With no other funds than unbounded trust in God's Providence, she set out on the long journey. Her confidence was amply justified by more than one almost miraculous instance of God's fatherly solicitude. Thus, when on her arrival in Paris, she knew not where to turn for aid, she met a stranger who asked her whether she could give him Sister Bourgeoys' address, as he had a sum of money to return to her. Two years of journeying amid the trials and difficulties of seventeenth century travel resulted in a threefold gain. Thanks to Colbert's influence, the Letters Patent were duly signed by Louis XIV, and registered in the Parliament of Paris. Six generous recruits joined the Congregation de Notre Dame and, these, with the grateful Foundress, were blessed by Mgr. de Laval, who had reached Paris from Quebec not long before. A devout client of Mary, Monsieur de Fancamp, gave Mother Bourgeoys a miraculous statue of

our Blessed Lady. As a last token of their Heavenly Mother's protection, the little company, when sailing from Havre, found a favorable wind on the feast of the Visitation, and reached Quebec on the eve of the Assumption, 1672.

The Community in Ville Marie was in such destitution that Mother Bourgeoys was greeted with the news of its imminent downfall. "He who allows it to fall," she calmly replied, "can raise it up again when He wills." Poverty was a welcome inmate of her convent, for she rejoiced in absolute dependence on Providence for the very necessities of life. Her trustful prayer brought flour and wine in moments of need, and for months together, multiplied provisions which she shared with still poorer colonists.

As early as 1657 Mother Bourgeoys had endeavored to fulfil her promise of building a church in the Blessed Virgin's honor. Obedience to ecclesiastical authority had

obliged her to interrupt the labor of love. In 1675 the task was resumed, all the colonists lending their enthusiastic help. In a short time, the first stone Church dedicated to Our Lady rose up on North American soil. The precious statue of Notre Dame de Bon Secours was placed over its altar, and a renewal of devotion and fervor soon became apparent in and around Ville Marie.

The three religious communities of Ville Marie were carrying out an ideal dear to the heart of the Venerable Monsieur Olier, Founder of the Sulpicians. He had desired that the members of his order honor Our Lord by their priestly lives, that the Sisters of the Hotel Dieu de St. Joseph spread devotion to their patron while nursing the sick, and that the Congregation de Notre Dame reproduce the apostolic life of the Blessed Virgin. This practical method of glorifying the *Earthly Trinity* had given rise to a Confraternity of the Holy Family,

into which many colonists were admitted by Father Chaumonot, S. J.

The Sulpicians in 1676, opened an Indian mission on the slopes of Mount Royal. They undertook to teach boys, and asked Sister Bourgeoys to take charge of the girls. This offer gave a wider scope to her zeal for the heathen tribes whose salvation had been the master motive inducing her to leave home and country. She accepted readily, and set to work with all her usual ardor. The King contributed to the apostolic work by a generous grant of money. Two Sisters were lodged in bark cabins, until Monsieur de Belmont, Superior of the Seminary, gave them the two stone towers which may still be seen in the gardens of their Grand Séminaire. One became a school house, the other was modestly fitted up as a dwelling for the Sisters. There, Indian girls were taught reading, writing, sewing, and above all, the uplifting truths of Christianity.

In 1676, Mgr. de Laval allowed the Congregation, now canonically recognized, to admit subjects to religious profession. Its members were to take simple vows and to be uncloistered. They were among the first to adopt a mode of life which is now the most usual among religious women. Mother Bourgeoys ardently desired to obtain episcopal approbation for her rules and constitutions. In order to complete the latter and to submit them to Mgr. de Laval, who was then in Paris, she resolved to cross the ocean for the third time. Before leaving she assembled the community, and begged her companions to elect another superior. Moved by a common impulse, they cried out: "Mary will be our first Superior, our Teacher and our Mother for time and for eternity!" Then they asked Mother Bourgeoys to be the Blessed Virgin's representative. Before they parted, Mother Bourgeoys invoked the Queen of Heaven in favor of her daughters, be-

seething her to take their spiritual and temporal interests under her maternal care, and to obtain for them, as well as for their successors and benefactors, salvation and eternal happiness.

Nothing but pain and failure resulted from Mother Bourgeoys' last journey to France. Mgr. de Laval bade her defer the completion of her rules, and refused to let her take any new subjects to Canada. She set sail immediately for Quebec without even revisiting Troyes. A group of young girls destined for New France was placed under her care. During the crossing, great alarm was caused by the sight of an English warship. (England and France were then at war.) The young colonists clung to Sister Bourgeoys, crying aloud: "What will become of us?" "If we are captured," she replied with a smile, "we shall be taken to England or to Holland and there we shall find God as surely as everywhere else." All joined in prayer and within

two hours the enemy had disappeared.

Three years later, in 1683, the Congregation Convent with all it contained was burned to the ground. Two of the religious—one of them, Marguerite Bourgeoys' own niece—perished in the flames. The community seemed once more in danger of dissolution. Mgr. de Laval decided to unite it with the Ursuline order, but Mother Bourgeoys firmly rejected this proposition as being utterly opposed to the providential mission of her little community. The Bishop yielded to her wishes, and Providence interposed to save it from destruction. New subjects came in such numbers that within two years forty members had been received.

In 1689, the Bishop of Quebec, who had greatly admired the work done at the Industrial school, asked Mother Bourgeoys to open a similar establishment in his episcopal city. The new foundation prospered and Mother Bourgeoys also opened day

schools for the poorer and a boarding-school for the wealthier class of children. Difficulties having arisen about the sale of a piece of land, Mother Bourgeoys gave up her legal rights to prevent ill-feeling. "I wish at all costs," she said, "not only to love my neighbor, but also to keep my neighbor in the love he owes me."

After Mother Bourgeoys' return to Montreal, Mgr. de St. Vallier, who had replaced Mgr. de Laval, wrote asking her to confer with him about the foundation of a General Hospital in Quebec. Despite her sixty-nine years, in spite of melting snow and April rain, she started immediately and walked the one hundred and eighty miles to Quebec. She was often obliged to drag herself along on hands and knees, through snow and water or over treacherous ice. An interview with the Bishop convinced her that the intended foundation was opposed to the spirit of her institute. However, out of obedience



she made an attempt. This entailed much hard work. She even carried on her shoulders furniture and utensils from the Upper to the Lower Town. After toiling four days of Holy Week, she spent the night of Holy Thursday on her knees before the Blessed Sacrament. The Sisters in Quebec derived fresh strength and fervor from their beloved Mother's exhortations. She repeated her favorite counsels: "Be always little, humble, and poor. When you are sent on mission go joyfully to gather up the drops of our Savior's Precious Blood which would otherwise be wasted. Be ever loving spouses of Christ, rejoicing to labor and suffer for Him. Above all things, practise love of God and of your neighbor."

The year 1693 brought a crowning joy to Mother Bourgeoys and her daughters in Montreal. Up to that time the Chapel was only an oratory, a place for common prayer. Then, at last, the Divine Guest took up His abode among those who had

long and ardently desired His abiding Sacramental Presence. Jeanne Le Ber, daughter of a rich merchant, offered a generous sum of money for the erection of a Church. One condition was laid down: that a little cell be built behind the altar where she might spend the rest of her life in prayer and retirement. Within two years the Church was completed, and Sister Le Ber entered upon an existence of solitude and holy converse with God. On the 6th of August, Mass was offered for the first time in the Congregation Church. From that period dates the perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament which is still continued in the Mother House Chapel.

### III

Then came Venerable Marguerite Bourgeoys' last purification. She spent four long and painful years in a spiritual Gethsemane, and drank deeply of that bitter

chalice of desolation which Our Blessed Lord reserves for His dearest friends. Like Christ upon the cross, she cried out in anguish: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" while the Lord Who ever reigned in her heart seemed deaf to her prayers. Crushed by this trial more than by the weight of years and of labor, she begged to be relieved of the superiority. At last, Mgr. de St. Vallier yielded. Then the shadow passed away from Mother Bourgeoys' soul. One anxiety remained: the rule for which she had toiled and prayed so long was not yet approved. It was, therefore, subject to changes and relaxation. However, after being examined by wise and holy men, and modified by Monsieur Tronson, Superior of St. Sulpice, it was finally approved, and given to the Sisters of the Congregation on June 24th 1698, by Mgr. de St. Vallier himself. The following day, the religious promises were publicly made for the first time, and the custom of adopting the name of a Saint

or of a Mystery was introduced. Mother Bourgeoys chose that of *Sœur du Saint Sacrement*. Her youthful devotion to Mary had led her, as it does all her clients, to Jesus in His Sacrament of Love.

The servant of God had spent six years under obedience in heroic fidelity to her rule, when her conscience and her superiors imposed on her the obligation of writing an account of the graces received during her long life-time. The book she thus composed at the age of seventy-eight forms a precious spiritual bequest for her religious family. Besides autobiographical notes of rare vivacity and charm, it contains a treasury of maxims embodying principles which had guided her own soul in the heroic service of God and souls, and filial imitation of Mary Immaculate, Teacher, Mother and First Superior of the Congregation de Notre Dame.

When another year had gone by, the aged Foundress was laid low by an apparently mortal illness. An unexpected

recovery caused her gently to reprove her daughters for prolonging her life by their prayers. However, in the night preceding the 1st of January, 1700, a Sister awakened Mother Bourgeoys with the news that Sister Charly, at that time Mistress of Novices, was dying. She cried out; "My God, why dost Thou not take me who am useless, instead of one who can do so much for the Community?" The next day Sister Charly was out of danger and Mother Bourgeoys was stricken by burning fever and acute pain. Twelve days of suffering borne with heroic patience prepared her for eternity. Mortification, obedience, cheerful submission to Providence, ardent love of God and of souls — these, her lifelong virtues shone out more brightly than before. The grief-stricken Sisters gathered round her deathbed to hear her loving words of counsel and to see her receive the Last Sacraments. Then after three hours of peaceful agony, she calmly

breathed forth her soul to God on January 12th 1700. Forty-six years of her apostolic life had been devoted to Montreal. After death, all trace of age and toil vanished from her countenance, which shone with heavenly radiance.

Montreal, or rather, all Canada, was stirred by the news of this bereavement. Crowds came to gaze upon Marguerite Bourgeoys' body, and to apply religious objects thereto with as much faith and reverence as though the holy Foundress had already been proclaimed one of God's Saints. Her funeral was celebrated in the parish Church of Montreal. Never before had such a throng gathered there to pay homage to one equally honored and beloved. An eye-witness wrote to his friends in France: "There were never so many priests or religious in the Church of Montreal as were present this morning at Mother Bourgeoys' funeral. The Governor-General and the Governor of Montreal assisted. The

concourse of people was extraordinary. If Saints were canonized now as of old, the Mass of St. Margaret of Canada would be offered tomorrow." Monsieur Dollier de Casson, then eighty years of age, who held Mother Bourgeoys in the highest esteem, pronounced the funeral oration.

Thirty days after her death, the Venerable Mother's heart, enclosed in a leaden box was placed in a niche prepared for it in the wall of the Congregation Church. A second panegyric was preached by Monsieur de Belmont.

From that day to this, Venerable Marguerite Bourgeoys' name has been dear to the Canadian people, and many graces have been obtained by her intercession. On December 7th 1878, under the pontificate of Leo XIII, a decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites declared her Venerable. Under Pius X, a further step was made in her cause by the publication of a new decree asserting that the virtues

of the servant of God were heroic. Prayers are being fervently offered that under his Successor, Pope Benedict XV, she may be declared Blessed. May her daughters and their pupils have the joy of seeing her, in the near future, raised to the altars of the Church as St. Margaret of Canada!

In spite of many trials and the loss by fire of three successive Mother Houses, the Congregation de Notre Dame has grown and prospered throughout Canada and the United States. Its rules have been definitely approved by the Holy See. It includes 131 establishments in 24 dioceses, 1889 professed religious and upwards of 41,000 pupils. The school system of the Congregation de Notre Dame begins with the Kindergarten. The subsequent courses are graded as elementary, model, academic and collegiate. Domestic Science enters into the programme of all Convents of the Institute. The Normal Schools of Montreal, Saint Pascal and Joliette have realized the hopes



centered in them, while Notre Dame Ladies' College, Montreal, and Mount St. Bernard, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, are worthy monuments to the labors of Canada's pioneer teacher — the Venerable Marguerite Bourgeoys.

May the Immaculate Mother of God to whose care this little plot of God's Garden was confided by our sainted Foundress continue to guide and guard her loving children.



