



## St. Marguerite Bourgeois

**Born:** 17 April 1620 Troyes, Champagne, Kingdom of France

**Died:** 12 January 1700 (aged 79) Fort Ville-Marie, New France, French Colonial Empire

**Venerated:** in Roman Catholic Church (Canada and the United States), Anglican Church of Canada

**Beatified:** 12 November 1950 by Pope Pius XII

**Canonized:** 31 October 1982, Vatican City by Pope John Paul II

**Major shrine:** Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel in Montreal, Quebec, Canada

**Feast:** 12 January

**Patronage:** against poverty; loss of parents; people rejected by religious orders  
St. Marguerite Bourgeois, C.N.D. (17 April 1620-12 January 1700), was a French nun and founder of the Congregation of Notre Dame of Montreal in the colony of New France, now part of Québec, Canada. Born in Troyes, she traveled to Fort Ville-Marie (now Montreal) by 1653. There she developed the convent and educated young girls, the poor, and children of First Nations until shortly before her death at the turn of the 18th century. She is also significant for developing one of the first uncloistered religious communities in the Catholic Church. Declared "venerable" by the pope in 1878, she was canonized in 1982 and declared a saint by the Catholic Church.

### Early life

Marguerite Bourgeois was born in Troyes, then in the ancient Province of Champagne in the Kingdom of France, on 17 April 1620. The daughter of Abraham Bourgeois and Guillemette Garnier, she was the seventh of their thirteen children. Marguerite came from a middle-class and socially connected background, as her father was a candle maker and coiner at the royal mint in the town. Her father died when she was very young, and her mother when Marguerite was 19.

As a girl, Bourgeoys was never much interested in joining the confraternity of the Congregation Notre-Dame attached to the monastery in town. It had been founded in 1597 by the Blessed Alix Le Clerc, C.R.S.A., dedicated to the education of the poor. The canonesses of the monastery helped the poor, but remained cloistered. They were not allowed to teach outside the cloister. To reach poor young girls who could not afford to board within the cloister as students, they relied upon the confraternity, whose members they would educate in both religion and pedagogy. On 7 October 1640, during a procession in honor of Our Lady of the Rosary, Bourgeoys decided to dedicate herself to God and to live imitating the Virgin Mary.

She supported the education of children (and especially girls), with courage and independence. Given the early deaths of her parents, her life was difficult. But she decided at about age 15 to join the Congregation and worked through the process. Later on, Marguerite became well known as a lecturer.

Before February 1653, Bourgeoys accepted the assignment to set up a congregation and a mission in New France. She set sail on the Saint-Nicholas from France along with approximately 100 other colonists, mostly men. They had been recruited and signed to working contracts.

### **Life in the colony**

Upon her arrival in the port of Quebec City on the following 22 September, Bourgeoys was offered hospitality with the Ursuline nuns there while transportation to Ville-Marie was arranged. She declined the offer and spent her stay in Quebec living alongside poor settlers. This hints at her character and the future character of her congregation in Montreal - a secular and practical approach to spreading God's will. She arrived in Ville-Marie on 16 November.

Though this period of Bourgeoys' life in New France pales in comparison to her later years in terms of expansionary scope and influence, it is often seen as much more intimate. Bourgeoys would have known practically everyone in the colony. However, she also faced difficult struggles during her first years there. There were no children to teach due to the high levels of infant mortality, which frustrated her plan to provide education. Despite this, she took it upon herself to help the community in any way she could, often working alongside the settlers.

During these early years, Bourgeoys did manage to make some significant initiatives. In 1657 she persuaded a work party to form in order to build Ville-Marie's first permanent church - the Chapel of Our Lady of Good Counsel (French: Bonsecours). She was provided with a vacant stone stable by de Maisonneuve, founder of Ville Marie, in April 1658 to serve as a schoolhouse for her students. This was the beginning of public schooling in Montreal, established only five years after Marguerite's arrival. Today a commemorative plaque marks the site of the stable school in Old Montreal. It can be found on a wall just below the southwest corner of Saint-Dizier and Saint-Paul Streets.

Soon after receiving the stable, Bourgeoys departed for France with the goal of bringing back more women to serve as teachers for the colony. This allowed her to house and to care for the "King's Daughters," or filles du roi, as they are known in Quebec (orphan girls sent by the Crown to establish families in the colony) upon their arrival from Europe. Marguerite and her four companions were also responsible for examining the male settlers who arrived seeking a wife.

## Later life

The small group began to follow a religious way of life, establishing periods of common prayer and meals. The women, however, would spend time on their own in various towns throughout the colony, teaching the local children. During this three-year period, Bourgeoys and her small community sought various forms of official recognition and legitimation from both the Crown and the religious establishment in New France. In 1669, Bourgeoys had an audience with the colony's highest religious authority, François de Laval, the Apostolic Vicar of New France. He ultimately granted her wishes through an ordinance that gave permission to the congregation Notre-Dame to teach on the entire island of Montreal, as well as anywhere else in the colony that saw their services as necessary. The bishop, however, later attempted to draft a Rule of Life for the community which would have imposed enclosure upon them.

In 1670 Bourgeoys set out once again for France, this time with the goal of gaining an audience with the King to protect the unenclosed nature of her community. She left with no money or clothing, only with a letter of recommendation by Jean Talon, Royal Intendant of the colony, in which he declares her great contribution to its future. By May 1671, she had not only met with Louis XIV, but had obtained letters patent from him which secured the viability of her community in New France as "secular Sisters". In fact, the French monarch went so far as to write that: "Not only has (Marguerite Bourgeoys) performed the office of schoolmistress by giving free instruction to the young girls in all occupations (...), far from being a liability to the country, she had built permanent buildings (...)."

"Golden Age" Helene Bernier refers to the future saint's work after 1672 as the "Golden Age" of the Congregation. During the period, Bourgeoys' work as educator expanded rapidly in response to the growing needs and demands of the colony.

Though she always devoted the majority of her efforts to helping the more needy members of society, she also established a boarding school at Ville-Marie so that more affluent girls would not need to venture all the way to Quebec for their education. She went on to establish a school devoted to needle-work and other practical occupations for women in Pointe-Saint-Charles. Other smaller schools were also established and run by other members of the Congregation in places such as Lachine, Pointe-aux-Trembles, Batiscan and Champlain. In 1678, Marguerite also expanded into Native societies, setting up a small school in the Iroquois village of "la Montagne" (Montreal).

Marguerite made a third trip to France in 1680 to protect the unenclosed character of her institution and seek additional members. Bishop Laval, also visiting France, forbade her to bring back any new recruits. However, the recruitment of Canadian-born women into the congregation assured the survival of her work. Though Bourgeoys may have returned to New France somewhat frustrated with the bishop, her influence continued to grow in the colony.

The 1680s saw the congregation grow significantly and finally gain a strong foothold in the city of Québec. The new bishop in the colony, Jean-Baptiste De La Croix de Saint-Vallier, had been impressed with the vocational school that Bourgeoys had established in Ville-Marie and worked with her towards establishing a similar institution in Quebec. A large number of sisters were also brought to Île d'Orléans to help the growing community in that area. In 1692, the congregation opened a school in Quebec that catered to girls from poor families.

## **Final years**

After announcing that she would step down in 1683, Marguerite relented and stayed on as the figurehead of the Congregation until 1693. Although she gave up daily leadership, she attempted to help her sisters retain the spirit which had characterized the Congregation from the start. Bourgeoys and her colleagues kept their secular character despite efforts by Bishop Saint-Vallier to impose a cloistered life upon them through a merger with the Ursulines. On July 1, 1698, the congregation was "canonically constituted a community".

During her last two years, Bourgeoys devoted her time primarily to prayer and writing her autobiography, of which some remnants have survived. She died peacefully in Montreal on 12 January 1700. Her likeness, painted by Pierre Le Ber immediately after her death, portrays the compassion that animated her life. The portrait can be seen in the Marguerite Bourgeoys Museum.

## **Veneration and canonization**

Before Bourgeoys received official recognition in 1982 as a saint in the Catholic Church, many people already believed that she had the virtues of one. The day following her death, a priest wrote, "If saints were canonized as in the past by the voice of the people and of the clergy, tomorrow we would be saying the Mass of Saint Marguerite of Canada." Helene Bernier writes, "[P]opular admiration had already canonized her 250 years before her beatification."

Numerous stories related to the time preceding her death. The elderly Sister Bourgeoys was said to have given up her life to God in order to save that of a younger member of the Congregation who had fallen ill. After intense prayer, the young nun was said to be cured and Marguerite fell terribly ill, dying soon thereafter. After her death, she continued to be admired and highly regarded. The convent held an afternoon visitation open to the public; people treasured objects that they touched to her hands at this time, which became spiritual relics. Her body was kept by the parish of Ville-Marie, but her heart was removed and preserved as a relic by the Congregation.

Marguerite was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1982, the first female saint of Canada. The process was begun nearly 100 years before in 1878, when Pope Leo XIII gave her the title of "venerable" by papal decree. In November 1950, Pope Pius XII beatified her, giving her the title "Blessed Marguerite Bourgeoys." The two miracles that led to her beatification both involved a miraculous cure from gangrene of the foot, gained by Joseph Descoteaux of St. Celestin, Quebec, and John Ludger Lacroix of St. Johnsbury, Vermont. On 2 April 1982, Pope John Paul II issued the Decree of Miracle for a cure attributed to her intercession; on 31 October that year, she was canonized as Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys.