

# Drawing down the graces

## Midweek Musings

Brother Patrick



On a bleak midwinter's day in 1653, a young woman boarded a ship with a hundred other passengers

that set sail from France to Canada. Her name was Marguerite Bourgeoys (1620-1700). At the invitation of the governor of the French settlement that would soon become the city of Montreal, Marguerite undertook the long and arduous journey with hopes of building a school for poor children.

Four years later, Marguerite Bourgeoys opened the school in an empty stone building. The so-called "stable school" served as a model for Montreal's public school system. Marguerite also organized the construction of the community's first church, a small chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Good Help. And she founded the Congregation of Notre Dame, a religious order of women that educated children, cared for the poor, and lived not in a convent but among the local people.

At the time, Sister Marguerite's vision was considered quite radical. Custom and church law expected that religious orders for women would be cloistered.

But Marguerite's work so impressed King Louis XIV and Bishop Francois de Laval that they offered their full support for her unique and innovative community.

Later in life, Sister Marguerite walked from Montreal to Quebec City, a distance of 158 miles, in order to establish another community of female educators at the request of the city's bishop. By the time she died in 1700, Sister Marguerite was hailed as the "Mother of Canada." A friend and priest said: "If saints were canonized as in the past by the voice of the local people, then tomorrow we would be celebrating the Mass of Saint Marguerite of Canada." In reality, Saint Marguerite was not canonized until 1982. She is now venerated as a patron of orphans and poor families. Her feast is celebrated Jan. 12.

Prayer and teaching were Saint Marguerite's passions in life and the twin pillars of her order. About prayer, she said: "It seems to me that we do not pay enough attention to prayer, for unless it arises from the heart which ought to be its center, it is no more than fruitless dreaming. Prayer ought to carry over into our thoughts, our words, and our actions." Indeed, Saint Marguerite was so dedicated to her devotions that when the Chapel of Our Lady of Good Help was engulfed by fire, tradition holds that her prayers alone saved both a cherished reliquary and a beloved statue of the Virgin Mary.

As for the value of education, Saint Marguerite wrote: "Teaching is the work most suited to draw down the graces of God if it is done with purity of intention, without distinction between the poor and the rich, between relatives and friends and strangers, between the pretty and the ugly, the gentle and the grumblers, looking upon them all as drops of the Lord's blood." This bold spirit of kindness, fraternity, and generosity has inspired generations of believers to venerate Saint Marguerite and to beg for her powerful prayers. Throughout her long life, she was the rare person who could look beyond differences and see the common bond of humanity among all of God's children.

Nowadays, when it seems so difficult to find virtue at work in the world, we need look no further than the life and legacy of Saint Marguerite, a dedicated educator and courageous person of faith. By the light of her life and good works, we can see more clearly how God lives, loves, and walks among us; and we can cry out with grateful and yearning hearts: Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys, pray for us and for our children!

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*Midweek Musings rotates among Cape Ann clergy.*