

# Marguerite Bourgeoys

"I went to meet them at the shore, believing that we must open wide the doors of the Blessed Virgin's house ..."  
Marguerite Bourgeoys wrote these words about the first mother house of her Congregation when she described her reception of the first "filles du roi" 350 years ago. "The Blessed Virgin's house" was the small stone stable in which, five years earlier, she had installed a hearth before opening Montreal's first school. That first mother house, then, was a place of warmth and welcome, reflecting the qualities of Marguerite herself.

When Marguerite Bourgeoys arrived in Montreal in 1653, all her material possessions were tied up in a small bundle but she also carried considerable non-material baggage. She came with the heritage of centuries of Christian faith in her home, the ancient and beautiful city of Troyes. She brought with her the fruit of twelve years of experience teaching the poor children of that city, her response to the "touch" of grace that had transformed her life in 1640.

There she had learned the latest teaching techniques but, above all, she had acquired certain fundamental convictions about education. These included the importance of the education of women both for the welfare of the family and of society as a whole and the importance of teaching poor people the skills they needed to earn a living and support themselves and their families in dignity. Marguerite also brought with her the skills and business acumen of her artisan ancestors and her own considerable natural gifts, a joyous disposition and the power to draw into community any group among whom she found herself. Finally, she carried in her heart the dream of a religious community of women who would share the lives of the people they served.

In the ensuing years that dream became a reality in the form of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame de Montréal, North America's first community of uncloistered women. By the time of Marguerite Bourgeoys's death in 1700, the Congregation had numbered women from France recruited by Marguerite herself, Native women, daughters of the first French settlers and even women from the English colonies. The school in Montreal was the first of several established in the settlement along the Saint Lawrence and many other young people were reached by the "travelling missions." The education offered was free and the sisters supported themselves and their work through their own skills and by farming. They were well able, then, not only to welcome the "filles du roi" but to initiate them into the skills that they would need as pioneer wives and mothers, and were even able to open a trade school. The Congregation has continued Marguerite's work for three centuries and through many mother houses that have aspired, like the first, to be open, warm and welcoming.



*Vrai portrait de Marguerite Bourgeoys*  
Pierre Le Ber  
Congrégation de Notre-Dame Collection, Marguerite-Bourgeoys Museum

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**Photo:** Marguerite-Bourgeoys Museum