

# AFTER 350 YEARS, THE JOURNEY CONTINUES IN EIGHT COUNTRIES ON FIVE CONTINENTS...

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The origins of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame and that of Montreal cannot be separated. In 17<sup>th</sup> century France, a group of devout men and women dreamed of establishing a Christian society in the New World in the image of the early Church, a society where French and Amerindians would live in harmony. Ville-Marie was founded on the island of Montreal in 1642 in order to fulfill this dream. In 1652, its governor, Paul de Chomedey de Maisonneuve, asked Marguerite Bourgeoys to contribute to this initiative by becoming the first teacher of the colony. This is why she came to Ville-Marie with *la grande recrue*, one-hundred new colonists, in 1653. She brought with her the experience she had gained teaching underprivileged children for twelve years in the extern congregation of Notre-Dame in Troyes.

In 1658, Marguerite Bourgeoys finally opened the first school in Ville-Marie in an abandoned stable. To ensure the permanence and stability of education for the children of the colonists and the Amerindians, she founded, in 1659, the Congrégation de Notre-Dame de Montréal, the first community of unclioistered women in North America. Marguerite Bourgeoys and her companions taught the children to read, write, and count as well as some manual skills. However, the sisters' main objective was to provide religious instruction. Marguerite's view was that education should influence every aspect of a person's life as well as the whole of society. Furthermore, her mission of education was not restricted exclusively to the classroom. She opened a domestic science school where underprivileged young women learned the skills they needed to earn their living. She also welcomed the *Filles du Roy*; she lived with them, prepared them for their new roles and helped them choose a husband.

Even during Marguerite Bourgeoys's lifetime, the work undertaken in Ville-Marie spread in order to meet the needs of the population and the calls of the Church. In time, the Congregation enlarged its field of action. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it opened schools in Ontario, in the Maritime provinces and in the United States. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Congregation traveled abroad to establish missions in Japan, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Cameroon and in France, in Troyes, the city where Marguerite Bourgeoys was born.

As an international and multicultural family present in eight countries on five continents, the sisters live their mission of liberating education faithful to the [spirit] of Marguerite Bourgeoys.<sup>1</sup> We find them in their roles as teachers especially in the United States and Japan. They are also engaged in catechetics, in family, parish and diocesan pastoral ministries, spiritual accompaniment, advocating women's rights, vocation promotion and community work. They are committed to liv[ing] simply and closer to the reality of the impoverished, the excluded and the oppressed. In solidarity with them, they are committed to protect[ing] our planet and to participat[ing] actively in the transformation of Church and society for a more just world.<sup>2</sup>

