

## CHOOSING A PATRON SAINT OF THE SOCIETY OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL IN CANADA

### Saint Marguerite d'Youville, Mother of Universal Charity



Among Canadian saints, Marguerite d'Youville is in my opinion the one whose life witness, works and spirituality most reflect the mission of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. She was canonized on December 9, 1990, the first person born in Canada to become a saint. Her feast day is celebrated on October 16, the date of her baptism.

A descendant of lords Pierre Boucher and Gaultier de Varennes, but fatherless at the age of seven, Marguerite and her family experienced hardship and misery before she was married in Montreal in 1722. She had to stay with her husband François d'Youville's parsimonious mother, and François was mostly absent. He had a farm at Bout-de-

L'Isle and there he worked in the fur trade, receiving furs arriving from the Outaouais. The family was disliked in the city and when Marguerite's mother-in-law died in 1725, nothing improved. She suffered loneliness, lost heritage, and, in 1727, the death of their third child of the four already born. It is then that God responded to her tears. He made her feel how much He is the Father of all goodness, whom she could lean on.

Marguerite confided in her parish priest and joined the fraternity of the Holy Family. In 1729, her second son was born (who would survive with his older brother). Her growing piety included concern for others. She was pregnant for the sixth time when she was widowed in 1730 and she lost this fourth daughter. She also did not inherit slaves, as her husband's property had been seized by his creditors. She worked hard to support herself, her two boys and the needy people around her. Her inner attraction to the universal love of the Father increased her determination to commit herself to reflecting His concern for all people. She visited the poor, the sick, prisoners, and residents of the General Hospital. She also repaired their clothes.

Her example was noticed. Three women joined her in 1737 and together they devoted themselves to the service of the poor. Soon after, Marguerite, who was already known as "the mother of the poor", suffered severe knee pain, which immobilized her for seven years. In spite of this, the devotion of the group was such that in 1739, they housed ten poor women.

In the crucible of a fire at the house of Verrier in 1745, the basis of the work of this secular association was refined. As Teresa of Avila said, "God alone is enough". The earliest associates made a solemn promise to remain poor and united to "... receive, feed and maintain as many poor people as we are able to." Moved from one house to another, the "Grey Nuns" were offered in 1747 the re-establishment of the General Hospital that was on the verge of ruin. Confident like their "mother" in "the incomprehensible resources of Providence", they accepted. Renovated in three years, this mixed hospice took in 30 poor people: the elderly, the infirm, the incurably ill, the mentally ill, abandoned children, and girls from Correctional Services. Later on, even some old and destitute priests came.

In 1755, the Seven Years' War broke out, with its restrictions and shortages, more wounded and prisoners to accommodate, and others to buy from the Amerindians. The uncertainties of regime change followed, and then, between 1763 and 1764, high-ranking families returning to France ceded their slaves to the community. With the contribution of these slaves, all the poor people survived, even them.

On May 8, 1765, the hospital fire left 119 people on the street. At least the stone walls resisted the flames but, above all, the sisters maintained their faith in the goodness of the Father who would provide. Faith resonated daily in the recitation of the 'Litanies to the Eternal Father'. Through this faith, the entire building was raised once again and purchase of the Chateauguay seignury was finalized, using the contributions that were no longer coming from the rulers. In 1770, Mother d'Youville wrote: "We are 18 sisters, all infirm, who run a house where there are 170 people to feed and almost all of them to look after."

In short, this is why I invite you to see in Saint Marguerite d'Youville a woman of action rather than brilliance in her speeches or her few writings, the example of someone who drew from the very Heart of God and made it visible through the care given to the poor regardless of age, sex, nationality or religion. In each one she saw a brother, a sister, a subject of the Father's benevolence, starting with whoever suffered and was despised. Undoubtedly, she has seen in the poor whom she served members of the Body of Christ.

It should also be noted that in 2003, Saint Marguerite d'Youville was elected to the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame in the category of Health Leadership. Honoured for her entrepreneurial talents, she inspired the formation of five communities of the Daughters of Charity that has resulted in the creation of 163 Canadian medical institutions.

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