

Pioneer Schools

By

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This year of grace 1947, the second of a precarious peace, has been dedicated to Our Blessed Lady. Midway in its course, the splendid Marian Congress, conceived and organized by His Excellency Archbishop Alexander Vachon, drew thousands to Canada's Capital, where a tribute, unique in every aspect, glorified and invoked the Queen of Peace. The vivid remembrance of its every phase, civic, artistic, religious, cast a rich afterglow upon the following weeks. In that light, the Canadian Catholic Historical Association meets for its annual session, and its chosen gathering place is Montreal, the Ville-Marie of Canada's Heroic Age, where gallant founders toiled and battled under the protection of Mary, Mother of God.

Such is the twofold fitness of this subject, – "Pioneer Schools", – for the first school in Ville-Marie was opened by a fervent disciple and apostle of Our Lady, the Venerable Margaret Bourgeoys.

From time to time, the Holy Spirit has raised up in the Church of Christ, souls whose guiding star was Mary Immaculate. A few short weeks ago, amid the gorgeous pageantry of a Roman canonization, two such Marian saints were glorified: St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort (1673-1716) and Catherine Labouré, the Sister of Charity who received, in 1830, the great revelation of the miraculous medal. Margaret Bourgeoys is of their spiritual lineage.

Three hundred years ago, two men in distant parts of France, one of them a tax collector, the other a young priest, were told in vision that they were to accomplish much for God in a colony to be founded in Canada on an island named Montreal. Apparently by divine guidance, the two men were brought to a meeting in which they shared confidences as to Ville-Marie. The tax collector, M. de la Dauversiere, revealed that he was to establish a nursing and a teaching order of Sisters in Montreal, while Abbé Olier was convinced that his mission was to found a society of priests for work in the new colony. Dr. James J. Walsh, in his "History of Nursing", (P. J. Kenedy, N.Y.) thus traces the genesis of Ville-Marie. "Mary's Town". On August 7, 1640, the first Associates of the Montreal Company bought the aforesaid Island. Two years later, a valiant Catholic gentleman, Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve, founded the perilous settlement, and held it staunchly against harsh Nature and ruthless savages.

Exactly two months later, on Rosary Sunday, October 7, 1640, a girl of twenty, Margaret Bourgeoys by name, was following a procession in her native city of Troyes. The statue of Our Lady over a monastery portal, seemed suddenly

to come to life and to look upon her with a glance of transforming love that marked a turning point to higher sanctity.

Thirteen years went by. Guided by a chain of Providential circumstances, the young woman, whom God had meanwhile prepared and sanctified, set out with Paul de Maisonneuve to teach the children of VilleMarie. Fear, opposition, hesitation – all had been set at rest by Our Lady’s own promise: “Go, and I will not forsake you!”

Five years were spent in danger, privation and toil before Sister Bourgeoys could devote her life to teaching children. Her burning charity, which the saintly Pius X compared to that of St. Paul, embraced all the works of mercy and the manifold forms of Social Service, demanded by the relentless hardships of pioneer existence: she visited and nursed the sick in log cabins of Ville-Marie, she buried the dead, as she had learned to do in the wartorn and plague-infested France of her adolescent days; she comforted the widows and orphans of brave colonists slain by redskins; she instructed men and women in their rude homes; she washed and mended for the poor and the soldiers, often depriving herself of the necessaries of life.

In 1658, she laid the corner stone of her Congregation, the first religious community founded in North America, when she opened Montreal’s earliest school in a stone stable, – dear reminder of Bethlehem!-- the gift of Governor de Maisonneuve.

Her singularly social and patriotic zeal assumed every form of apostolic work: an industrial school and a sodality for the preservation of poor girls, a “settlement house”, where she received the “Filles du Roi”, girls of good family regularly sent out from France, whom she mothered, instructed in domestic science, prepared for marriage and followed in their after careers. There is a record at the Congregation of the baptism and death of a baby four days old and the death of its mother, aged nineteen. Many early marriage certificates are dated from the Congregation parlor and bear Sister Bourgeoys’ small, neat signature.

She brought together older girls in her little school on Sundays and holydays for instructions and pious reading, forming them into an “outside” Congregation, modelled on that to which she had belonged at the convent of her native Troyes. This congregation was inaugurated on July 2, 1658. The house where it met came to be called “The Congregation”. Later on its owners were popularly known as “The Sisters of the Congregation”. There exists a spiritual link between the French community, the Congregation de Notre Dame at Troyes, founded by St. Peter Fourier, and that founded at Ville-Marie, by the Venerable Margaret Bourgeoys. However, the Canadian Foundress had very definite personal aims and ideals, nor did she shrink from what was then considered a bold innovation – uncloistered religious life for women. Her single objective was the service of God and the saving of souls through devotion to Our Lady and in imitation of Mary’s apostolic life after the Ascension of her Divine Son. Hence

she chose the Mystery of the Visitation as the patronal feast of her institute. Moreover, she adapted the curriculum of her schools to the actual needs of the colony, teaching French and Indian children – already a bilingual program! – besides reading, writing, number work and singing, such homely crafts as weaving, sewing and cooking, with the things of God always first.

To quote Dr. J. B. O'Reilly: "Today when elementary education in Canada is at the crossroads, when some educationalists, have forgotten that a teacher affects eternity, and a system of education that is the same for boys and girls, that is the same for the country and the city, is breaking down, one might, with profit, study the methods of one of Canada's first educationalists, who built up a system of education indigenous to the country." ("Marguerite Bourgeoys," the Canadian Messenger of the Sacred Heart, September, 1943).

This system, from its root in the original stable, spread into the "petites écoles", developed into Normal Schools, now seven in number, six Colleges, of which Antigonish, 1908, was the first and Marianopolis, 1944 the latest, and the stately Pedagogical Institute, founded in 1909 – all animated, in spite of growth and outward change, by the spirit of Margaret Bourgeoys.

According to the learned Benedictine biographer, Dom Jamet, the missions outside of Montreal did not begin till 1683, when the Sisters of the Congregation were teaching schools at two places outside of the Island – Champlain and Batiscan – both beyond Three Rivers. However, Mgr. de Laval's reference to the excellent work done "in various parishes," in a letter praising Mother Bourgeoys' Community of teachers, is somewhat vague. The holy Bishop, who, for twenty years, had known and appreciated the Sister's intelligent and devoted work, expressed his wish to see them carry it out in every part of his immense diocese.

The earliest temporary or moving, mission (mission ambulante) was inaugurated by Mother Bourgeoys at the Mountain Cross, on the slope of Mount-Royal – the first place where her ardent desire to evangelize the Indians began to be realized. The date assigned is 1669. In 1676, the Sulpicians, who had taken over the spiritual and temporal care of Montreal in 1663, opened a regular Indian Mission at the same place. They asked Mother Bourgeoys to take charge of the girls. Two Sisters were housed in birch bark huts until M. de Belmont, Superior of the Sulpicians, gave them the two conical towers of gray stone (still to be seen in the garden of the Grand Seminary, on Sherbrooke Street West), one to be used as a dwelling. The Indians were prepared to help in teaching younger companions. Two of them entered the Congregation and became fervent religious.

The first English-speaking member of Mother Bourgeoys' Community was probably Lydia Longley, who had been captured by a band of Abenakis at Groton, near Boston, in July 1694. After a cruel forced march to Montreal, she was ransomed by the French, and placed as ward in the family of Jacques Le Ber,

father of the famous recluse of Ville-Marie, – the first and only “ anchoress ” of modern times! On August 5, 1695, Lydia assisted at the ceremony of reclusion in the little cell behind the altar of the Congregation chapel. After receiving instruction from Mother Bourgeoys, Lydia was baptized on April 24th, and soon entered the novitiate of Our Lady’s Congregation, receiving the name of Sister Sainte Madeleine. She died at the age of eighty-four, on July 20, 1758, in the sixty-second year of her religious life.

Mary Sayer, or Sayward, was taken prisoner by the vengeful Abenakis, then in league with the French, when they attacked York, Maine, after the reconquest of Acadia. All the inhabitants, except a few women, were put to death. Mary Genevieve, eleven, and her sister, Mary Joseph, seven, were brought to Montreal, where they, with their mother, were rescued by a friendly French family. Mother Bourgeoys took them under her care, and won them to the true Faith. The Puritan trio received baptism on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1693. According to a tradition handed down in the Congregation, Mary Genevieve was professed in 1700. Known as Sister of the Angels, she taught for a time at the Indian school, Sault au Recollet, and afterwards at Quebec. She died on March 28, 1717, at the age of thirty-six.

As the building of Bon Secours church and the story of the miraculous statue brought from France by Mother Bourgeoys in 1672, lies outside the subject of “ Pioneer Schools,” they must be merely mentioned here. Nor can many striking examples of her courage and holiness, such as the forty years of labour and suffering which led to the definite approbation of her rule by royal episcopal authority, find a place in this sketch. On June 25, 1698, twenty-four Sisters pronounced their vows, and Mother Bourgeoys assumed her chosen name of Sœur-du-Saint-Sacrement.

Two years later, the aged Foundress offered her life to prolong that of Sister Catherine Charly, daughter of a little girl whom she had brought out to Ville-Marie and mothered until the child was married to a young colonist. Mother Bourgeoys died the death of a saint on January 12, 1700, universally mourned throughout Canada.

Apart from the parish church, a few religious institutions and the Governor’s house, there were, at that time, only log cabins, where, according to Mother Bourgeoys’ advice morning and evening prayers were recited in common. There were fifty-four nuns, in the Congregation, forty-eight professed Sisters, and six novices. Besides the “ little schools ” for young girls in Montreal, there was a boarding school for French and Indian children, whom the Sisters, according to Mgr. de Saint-Vallier, quoted by the Sulpician Faillon, “ educate to great piety; from their house have gone forth many school mistresses, who dispersed through the colony, teach catechism to children and give conferences to young women.”

In spite of many vicissitudes, eight houses had been established in and

around Montreal, where children were taught gratuitously. In 1683, Mother Bourgeoys opened a second school for Indians, at Sault St. Louis, the present Caughnawaga, but it did not prosper, and was soon closed. In 1701, the Mountain Mission was transferred to Sault-au-Recollet (Backriver) then, in 1720, Oka, where the Sisters still direct a school.

At Point St. Charles, south-east of the old fort, Mother Bourgeoys had acquired land and entrusted a farm to Sister Crolo, one of the first group of fifteen French co-workers whom she brought out to Canada after three difficult journeys. Between 1672 and 1673 a few poor girls gathered there to be equipped for life in the colony. The establishment was known as “la Providence.” When Mgr. de Saint-Vallier visited it, he found twenty busy workers, and added his warm praise to that of Governor de Denonville. A venerable stone house still stands on a small piece of land overlooking the blue St. Lawrence. It contains interesting relics of Mother Bourgeoys’ time; a chair, an ancient clock, pinewood coffers, spinningwheels, looms, fine old candlesticks, etc. The first mission outside of VilleMarie, for French children was Pointe-aux-Trembles (1678), still active as a boarding-school. Lachine was founded about 1686. Begun in privation and poverty, it prospered until the horrible Indian massacre of 1689. The Sisters, whose house was within the garrison enclosure, were unharmed. However, they were recalled to Montreal. Reopened from 1692-1700, it was finally transferred in 1784 to its present beautiful site at Pointe-Claire.

In 1686, Bishop de Saint-Vallier’s letters mention that a Sister was doing excellent missionary work at Port Royal, Acadia, 600 miles south-east of Quebec. Who she was, with whom she made a journey whose hardships exceeded any previously experienced by the zealous Bishop – at a time when travel was by canoe, or on foot through virgin forests – remains an unsolved problem.

The mission at Lower Town, Quebec, was founded in 1692, though “the little Sisters of Margaret Bourgeoys” left from there as early as 1686, missionary teachers going, two by two, wherever they were needed. One of them was the intrepid mystic, Marie Barber, first Montrealer to enter the Congregation, and foundress in 1685 of an arduous mission at the Isle of Orleans. Champlain was opened in 1676; Chateau-Richer, 1689; catechism classes were initiated at Boucherville by Mother Bourgeoys, as early as 1668, but there was no permanent residence there until 1703.

The tale of foundations continued through the eighteenth century, up to the Seven Years War. Louisburg convent, founded in 1727, suffered from a British invasion. The nuns were captured and sent as prisoners to France, one dying on the way across. The mission there was ultimately abandoned. Its historic ruins may still be seen on the lonely sea-girt shore.

In 1759, the trials of a siege befell the Sisters in Quebec, where the convent at Pointe-aux-Trembles was pillaged and the Sisters, with eight boarders, were

taken prisoners. By order of General Wolfe, they were released the following day. The British Conquest inaugurated a new era. The expansion of the Congregation was checked when Sir Guy Carleton forbade religious communities to admit new members. A few years earlier, in 1747, because of hard times prevailing in the colony, ecclesiastical authorities, had temporarily limited the number of Sisters to eighty. However, progress was soon resumed, until, in 1869, there were over 100 novices and 441 professed Sisters, whose field of labour extended over Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and parts of the United States. In October 1932, five Sisters of the Congregation de Notre Dame entered the foreign Mission Field at Fukushima, Japan. After undergoing the terror and privation of the war years, when their houses became virtual concentration camps, the gallant missionaries are reaping a consoling harvest of conversions. The mission includes a novitiate, where the first-fruits of Congregation-de-Notre-Dame-in-Japan are following in Mother Bourgeoys' apostolic footsteps. All told, the Community has grown from pioneer days to 202 houses in West and East, with 3060 religious devoted to teaching all grades and striving to lead all "Ad Jesum per Mariam."

The Cause of Venerable Mother Bourgeoys' canonization has moved at a leisurely pace more in keeping with "le Grand Siecle" in which she lived than with our age of ever increasing speed. She was declared Venerable on December 7, 1878; the heroicity of her virtues, theological and moral, was proclaimed by Pope Pius X, on June 19, 1910. The next step draws near, for all the preliminaries required for Beatification have been completed.

Members of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association should be actively interested, at least by fervent prayer, in obtaining the honours of the altar and worldwide devotion for Margaret Bourgeoys, the heroic and holy Foundress of Canada's Pioneer Schools.

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