

THE STORY OF SAINTE MARGUERITE D'YOUVILLE

1701 Birth in Varennes

Marie-Marguerite Dufrost de Lajemmerais was born in Varennes, Quebec, on 15 October 1701. She spent a happy childhood there. Her father, Christophe Dufrost de la Gembrais, was a captain in the Marine Guards. Her mother, Marie-Renée, was the daughter of the first Lord of Varennes, René Gaultier. Marguerite's family belonged to the minor aristocracy of New France.

The family of Marie-Marguerite Dufrost de la Gembrais

Christophe Dufrost de la Gembrais, a French soldier born in Médréac in Brittany, came to New-France in 1687 as a member of the Marine Guards. By distinguishing himself in the various missions entrusted to him, he rose quickly in the military ranks.

Having become a lieutenant, he married Marie-Renée, daughter of René Gaultier, Lord of Varennes and Governor of Trois-Rivières, in Varennes on 18 January 1701. In the marriage contract, the bride brought as her dowry a plot of land adjoining the chapel of Varennes. It was in that chapel, in the same year, that their first child, Marie-Marguerite, was baptized, as recorded in the baptismal register of the parish of Saint Anne of Varennes:

“On the sixteenth day of the month of October of the year one thousand seven hundred and one, Father Guillaume Bulteau delegated to this task baptized Marie Marguerite, daughter of Christophe Dufrost, Esquire, Sieur de la Jemmerais, Lieutenant of the Guard, and of the Lady Marie-Renée Gaultier de Varennes, his wife, born the previous day. The godfather was Jacques René Gaultier de Varennes, and the godmother was Marie Marguerite Gaultier de Varennes whose signatures are appended.”

Marie-Marguerite was the eldest of six children. Her brothers Charles and Joseph would become priests, while her other brother, Christophe, would accompany his uncle, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes et de La Vérendrye, on his expeditions into the Canadian West. Her sisters, Marie-Clémence and Marie-Louise, would marry the Montreal merchants Pierre Gamelin Maugras and Ignace Gamelin, respectively.

Marguerite was descended on her mother's side from a family famous in the history of Canada. Her great-grandfather, Pierre Boucher (1622-1717), was the second Canadian to receive Letters of Nobility from Louis XIV in New-France. He also received the seigneurie of Boucherville as a reward for the great services he had rendered to the colony as an interpreter, linguist, writer, ambassador, and royal judge. Esteemed by his contemporaries and the father of a large family, he died at the age of 95, bequeathing to his family a spiritual testament that they read each year. Marguerite was sixteen years old at the time of his death and would have been inspired by the last words of this patriarch:

“I recommend that you maintain among you peace, union, and concord... Love one another all together in the sight of God... Trust in His goodness, and He will give you what is needed... Live in fear of Him, and He will care for you. God will care for you, and He will be a Father to you.”

1708 An impoverished family

Marguerite’s father died in 1708, and the family was rendered destitute. The King’s pension to officers’ widows was paid irregularly. Marie-Renée Gaultier de Varennes and her six children had to rely on help from their extended family, probably including the patriarch, Pierre Boucher. All her life, Marguerite was going to be sensitive to the distresses caused by poverty.

1712 Studies with the Ursulines

In August 1712, Marguerite was enrolled in the boarding school of the Ursulines in Quebec City. She studied there for two years and made her first communion. She left behind her the impression of an intelligent student with good judgement.

Marguerite at the Ursulines’



First Communion at the Ursulines’
Sister Flore Barette, s.g.m. 1951
ASGM Communion 1714

1720 An accomplished young lady

After having returned to Varennes, she helped her mother with the household tasks and was busy trying “to earn enough so that her brothers and sisters could eat”. The arts of sewing and embroidery that she had learned at the convent would help the family survive. Her brothers and sisters retained throughout their lives the lively affection their big sister had inspired in them during the difficult years of their childhood.

Her mother's second marriage to a young Irish doctor named Timothy Sullivan, who had emigrated from New England, was looked upon as a misalliance by the high society of Varennes and ruined the possibility of Marguerite's marriage to Louis-Hector Piot de Langloiserie. The family moved to Montreal in 1721.

1722 A beautiful wedding

A graceful young lady of 20, Marguerite married François Youville de la Découverte in August 1722. The Governor of Vaudreuil and all the high society of Montreal attended this beautiful wedding. The marriage, however, would turn out to be an unhappy one because of the illegal activities of Marguerite's husband.

François Youville de la Découverte

On his marriage contract, François signed his name François Youville de la Découverte. François's father, Pierre You, had been a companion of Robert, Cavalier de la Salle when he discovered the Mississippi and claimed the territory of Louisiana for the French crown, hence the title Sieur de La Découverte conferred by Louis XIV. Pierre You left to his sons Philippe and François a dubious kind of business on Île-aux-Tourtes near Vaudreuil. There, they controlled the movement of furs from the West and thus deprived the Montreal merchants of valuable cargo. They also supplied the First Nations people with alcohol. This illegal trade was known to the merchants of Montreal who bitterly complained about François Youville to the Colony's authorities.

1727 An abandoned wife

Following in his father's footsteps, François engaged in the illegal business of selling alcohol to the Native Americans. He was often absent from home, leaving his wife alone in the house with her quarrelsome mother-in-law. Marguerite's reputation was tarnished. Public opinion turned against the couple, and the first years of Marguerite's marriage were gloomy. She gave birth to six children in eight years and lost four of them in infancy. The two surviving sons, François and Charles, became priests.

The children of Marguerite d'Youville

Timothée (1723)

François Youville (1724-1778)

François left his mother in the autumn of 1737 to study at the Minor Seminary of Quebec City. At that time, Marguerite and her three companions were managing the Le Verrier House in Montreal. He became the priest of the parish of Saint Ours and, later, of Saint Rose (Laval). François Youville ended his days in the General Hospital in Montreal.

Ursule (1725–1726)

Louise (1726–1727)

Little Louise was buried in Pointe Claire on the island of Montreal, which may indicate that Marguerite sometimes followed her husband to the western part of the island.

Charles Dufrost (1729–1790)

Charles lived with his mother until 1742, when he went to Quebec to attend the Seminary. After he became a priest, he served the parish of Pointe Lévy in Quebec and then the parish of the Holy Family in Boucherville. Charles became the first biographer of his mother when he wrote, in 1772, *Vie de madame d'Youville, fondatrice des Sœurs de la Charité, à Montréal* (Life of Madame d'Youville, Foundress of The Sisters of Charity, in Montreal). He used the name of the Dufrost family to distinguish himself from his brother François Youville.

Ignace (1731)

1730 Death of François Youville

François Youville died from pleurisy at the age of 30. He left nothing but debts. Marguerite was obliged to refuse the inheritance. To ensure her survival and that of her two young boys, she operated a small retail business.

Charles tells us in his 1772 biography of his mother that the difficulties and trials experienced by Marguerite in her marriage caused her to weep bitter tears, but that “the goodness of her heart was such that despite all the indifference and harshness of her husband, she was deeply afflicted by his death”. She certainly suffered from this situation because she wrote much later to her niece:

“No happiness surpasses that of a united household; no earthly wealth can equal it. I thank God for the blessing he has given you.”

1737 A charitable lady

Marguerite sought comfort in her Christian faith and found in Gabriel du Lescöat, PSS, a priest of Notre Dame parish, a spiritual guide who led her towards an enlightened spirituality through trust in God the Father. This trust enabled her to go out towards others rather than turning in on herself. In 1727, she joined the Confraternity of the Ladies of the Holy Family. Later, Father Louis Normant de Faradon, PSS, became her spiritual director.

On 31 December 1737, with a friend, Louise Thaumur de la Source, and two other companions, Catherine Cusson and Catherine Demers, Marguerite pronounced private

vows with the intention of consecrating herself forever to the service of the poor. Members of Montreal's high society and even some members of her own family viewed askance this group of women who intended to live in common and devote their lives to the poor, living from their work.

This choice of life was disturbing because according to the social norms of the time women should be either married or in a convent. Furthermore, pushing religious devotion to the extent of actually coming into contact with the wretched of the earth offended the good taste of the class to which Marguerite belonged.

The Confraternity of the Ladies of the Holy Family

Devotion to the Holy Family was a very popular form of spirituality in New France. The confraternity went back to the founding of Montreal and experienced great growth through the influence of Bishop François de Laval. Many laywomen of all classes belonged to it. They found in it a rather austere spirituality modelled on the example of the Holy Family. Marguerite was a very active member of the confraternity, holding successively the positions of councillor, superior, and instructor of new members.

Frequent reading of the *Manuel de la solide dévotion à la Sainte Famille* (Manual of Sound Devotion to the Holy Family) was recommended to the members, as were visits to the poor.

Gabriel du Lescöat, Priest of Saint-Sulpice

The Priests of Saint-Sulpice, who arrived in Montreal in 1657, were in charge of Notre Dame parish. Their Superior was also the Lord Proprietor of Montreal. Father du Lescöat was the confessor and, one might even say, the spiritual guide of Marguerite. He was familiar with the charity, abilities, and devotion of the young widow Youville in regard to the poor. Among other things, the Sulpicians were looking for a viable solution for the maintenance of the Charon Brothers' General Hospital for the city's poor people. Because she was especially well-educated for her time, Marguerite appeared to them to be the person best suited to take over responsibility for the hospital. Prophetically, Father du Lescöat said to her: "Be consoled, my daughter, God has destined you for a great work...you will rebuild a house in ruins."

1745 A definitive commitment

The vows the four associates took on 31 December 1737 were renewed two days after the fire destroyed the Le Verrier House in January 1745. Interpreting the fire as a sign from God, Marguerite affirmed, "We have until now lived a little too comfortably; henceforth, we shall have more in common with the poor by living more like them."

1747 A weakened but courageous woman

In 1747, the General Hospital for the poor people of Montreal was in a deplorable state. The Sulpicians finally actualized their hope of conferring its administration on Marguerite Lajemmerais, the Widow Youville.

Tired and ill, Marguerite, who had long suffered from knee problems, became the provisional director of the General Hospital. She arrived at the hospital in a cart on 7 October 1747. Over the following years, she and her companions renovated the building, planted the gardens, and welcomed elderly men and women, the sick, and the mentally handicapped.

1750 The quarrel with Intendant Bigot

In 1750, Intendant Bigot issued an ordinance declaring that the General Hospital be closed and its residents transferred to Quebec City. This declaration produced a shock wave among the citizens of Montreal who had begun to recognize the importance of the work done by the Widow Youville. They were upset and suspected that the authorities were trying to cheat the poor people of Montreal. There followed a long epistolary quarrel between Marguerite and the Intendant in which Marguerite defended her Hospital with great intelligence and determination. However, her pleas were not answered and the removal of the Hospital's possessions was ordered.

The Sulpicians, supported at Court by their superior in Paris, played their last card. They pointed out a clause in the letters of incorporation of the Hospital in 1692 which stated that in the event of the Hospital's closure, the land and all the dependencies of the institution would revert to the Sulpicians of Montreal. Bigot had to admit defeat, and Marguerite won the battle.

1755 A dedicated woman

Marguerite and her companions had dedicated themselves to the care of all the poor and marginalized without distinction of sex, race, or ethnicity. They gave shelter to both French and English soldiers who had been wounded during the war. They had a separate ward for prostitutes under their roof. They also took in abandoned children. It was soon said of them, "Go to the Grey Nuns, they never refuse anything."



1763 Marguerite and the English Conquest

The War of Conquest was a dramatic time. It brought much suffering to Montreal. Marguerite d'Youville and her companions tried to respond to the needs of the population while famine reigned throughout the land. The people were living in a state of chaos, and the children especially suffered. As she was out walking with a companion, Marguerite found a baby who had been stabbed floating in the cold water of the Saint Pierre River. It was then that she decided to undertake the work of rescuing abandoned children.

Marguerite's magnanimity again became apparent during the war. She nursed and protected the wounded from both sides. Meanwhile, the surrender of France weighed heavily on the institution's finances, for it had furnished equipment to the King's army on credit. She wrote, "And then all at once to lose one's King, one's country, and one's livelihood."

From her letters, we also learn that Marguerite was very sad to be separated from her family members, like her niece Josephthe Gamelin, who left the country after the British Conquest. She ended a letter thus, "I am concluding blinded by my tears."

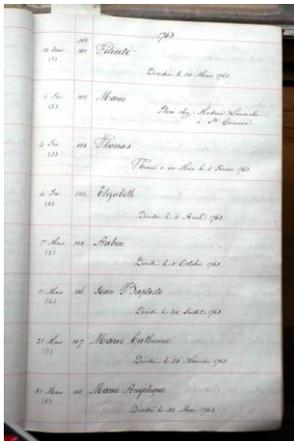
The work with abandoned children

The work with abandoned children was started by Marguerite d'Youville in 1754, and it has since formed an integral part of the mission of the Grey Nuns. For a long time, the Crèche d' Youville was housed in the General Hospital before being moved to the Mother House. In 1918, the orphanage and crèche moved from the Mother House to Côte de Liesse. Throughout these years, the Grey Nuns welcomed, lodged, fed, and educated children who had either been abandoned or were facing difficulties, in order to enable them to become honest citizens. The crèche was closed in 1972.

In 1966, in parallel to the activities of the Crèche d'Youville, the Grey Nuns in collaboration with the Society for the Adoption and Protection of Children, began a new kind of housing, the Youville Family Homes. Their purpose was to provide a happy family environment that was different from the institutional structures. The Youville Family Homes were directed until 1997 by Sister Thérèse Paradis, a woman very much involved in children's aid services.



Crèche d'Youville
ASGM L002



Register of abandoned children, 1763
ASGM L002-H, 4,79

Children were frequently abandoned during these times of war. In just the last half of the year 1760, seventeen children were received into the hospital, and thirty were taken in during the following year. By the time of Mother d'Youville's death, 318 children's names had been inscribed in the register. The majority of them died at a young age.

1765 The businesswoman

The granddaughter of a lord, Marguerite in her turn acquired the seigneurie of Châteauguay from one of her boarders, Marie-Anne de Lanoue, whose family had returned to France. She saw the possibilities of developing it for her charitable work. To ensure her household was fed, Marguerite had her boarders who were capable of working

to do so. They cultivated the fields, planted apple trees, and sold the farm's produce. Marguerite set up a ferry service between Longueuil and Montreal.

Marguerite d'Youville liked to go to Châteauguay, where she taught catechism to the children. Around 1850, an old man confided to one of the sisters, "*It was Mother Youville who taught us catechism. When we were good, she rewarded us.*"

Mother Youville in Châteauguay



Mère d'Youville enseignant le catéchisme à Châteauguay en 1766
Sister Flore Barette, s.g.m. 1942
Collection of The Grey Nuns of Montreal 1974.A.092

1771 Death of an extraordinary woman

Marie Marguerite Lajemmerais, the Widow Youville, died on 23 December 1771. She left behind her the memory of an extraordinary woman guided by a profound spirituality and a great sensitivity to human suffering.

Her spiritual testament echoes across the centuries:

"My dear Sisters, be constantly faithful to the duties of the state that you have embraced. Walk always in the path of regularity, obedience, and mortification. But above all, let the most perfect union reign among you." Words of Mother d'Youville, 14 December 1771

Marie Marguerite Lajemmerais, the Widow Youville



Mother d'Youville
François Beaucourt 1792
Collection of The Grey Nuns of Montreal 1973.A.026

1847 Stages of the canonization process

One hundred years after Marguerite d'Youville took charge of the General Hospital, the Council of the community decided to exhume the mortal remains of their venerated Foundress. Father Étienne-Michel Faillon, a Sulpician on a pastoral visitation from Paris, who was impressed by the extraordinary character of the life of Marguerite d'Youville and the vitality of her work, wrote her biography and became involved in the cause for her canonization. It was he who called her the “powerful woman from America”. The procedures at the Vatican were going to take another hundred years.

Stages of the canonization process

28 April 1890

As a consequence of the growing reputation of Marguerite d'Youville for sanctity and the biographical and theological research of Father Faillon, Pope Leo XIII introduced the cause for her canonization and conferred on her the title Venerable.

1901

Leo XIII issued a decree of reputation of holiness.

1955

Pius XII signed a decree declaring that Marguerite d'Youville was heroic in virtue.

1957

The Vatican recognized two cases of miraculous healing: one from tuberculosis and the other from blindness.

3 May 1959

Pope John XXIII declared Marguerite d'Youville Blessed and conferred on her the title of Mother of Universal Charity, using the words of her son, Charles Dufrost.

“Her house was open to all those afflicted by poverty, illness, and other needs without respect to age, nationality, sex, or religion; for Marguerite set no limits to her charity. Pouring out on all the wealth of supernatural love, she merited the title Mother of Universal Charity.” His Holiness Pope John XXIII, Decree of Beatification, 3 May 1959

9 December 1990

Pope John Paul II canonized Marguerite d'Youville.

9 December 2010

The Mortal Remains of Saint Marguerite d'Youville were laid to rest in a chapel dedicated to her in the Basilica of Saint Anne of Varennes.



Chapel of Saint Marguerite d'Youville in the Basilica of Saint Anne of Varennes