

Aging Notre Dame sisters still live the legacy of St. Marguerite Bourgeoys

They're an aging community and their future in Alberta remains uncertain. But the Congregation of Notre Dame sisters are still continuing the pioneering legacy of St. Marguerite Bourgeoys, 400 years after the saint was born.



Sister Marie Clarkin

Sister Marie Clarkin, one of only three CND sisters still in Alberta, often thinks of the courage and devotion of the French saint, who came to Canada in 1653 armed only with a desire to spread the Gospel and help others. St. Marguerite ministered to many First Nations of Ontario and Quebec. She also established the first school in Quebec.

Even in retirement, Sister Marie continues that legacy in Innisfail, south of Red Deer. At 79, Sister Marie is most inspired by the ways St. Marguerite sacrificed at that same age.

“As I age, I realize how much Marguerite surrendered,” said Sister Marie. “When Marguerite was 79, a younger sister in the congregation got very sick. Marguerite prayed to God and asked Him to spare the sick sister and instead take her. The younger sister did recover, and Marguerite died two weeks later.”



Congregation of Notre Dame Sisters are seen working in Alberta during the 1990s. Supplied

“When I pray now, I often ask God when I have to surrender. There’s so many things I love about St. Marguerite, but at this time in my life that’s what I most think about.”

It was this example that inspired Sister Paula Maher.

She spent 20 years as a missionary in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, ministering to poor and impoverished communities.



Sister Paula Maher

“That’s our biggest call – to help those in need,” said Sister Paula, 78, who now lives in Innisfail.

“Marguerite was very much for the poor and the excluded. She treated them as brothers and sisters, and I was always inspired by that. It’s important for me

to go out to those who don't seem included. You see them around town, in groups, in the school. I always try to accompany them and walk with them in whatever way I can."

Younger generations are just learning about that spirit of sacrifice.



Roberto Terrazas

"The more I learn about St. Marguerite and the sisters, the more I see how Marguerite lived like Jesus. She always put others before herself," said Roberto Terrazas, a Grade 8 student at St. Marguerite Bourgeoys Catholic School in Innisfail.

"In her time, many considered the Aboriginal people to be savages. But to St. Marguerite, everybody was equal. She wanted to teach everyone, and she gave all of her attention and all of her heart to them. I really admire what she did."

Over 30 Congregation of Notre Dame sisters have lived in Alberta since 1973, serving as teachers and counsellors. And St. Marguerite's name and image are found on stained glass windows and Catholic schools and churches across the province.

The sisters were invited to Alberta by Edmonton Archbishop Joseph MacNeil, and by priests from who attended Catholic schools taught by Congregation of Notre Dame sisters.



St Marguerite School in Spruce Grove is graced with stained glass artwork representing St. Marguerite Borgeois. Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

“The spirit of our congregation has never changed. We bring Jesus to others and we receive Jesus by ministering to them,” said Sister Marie. “We as a congregation are sent. No matter what, we go out to spread the Gospel, whether it’s next door or around the world.”

Today there are 682 Congregation of Notre Dame sisters worldwide, mostly in Canada, the U.S., France, Central America, Africa and Japan. Of the 483 in Canada, most are based in Quebec, Ontario, and the Maritimes.

In Innisfail, Sister Marie and Sister Paula spend much of their time visiting the sick and elderly. They are retired from teaching at St. Marguerite School. They also help families living in poverty or escaping domestic abuse.

“At our age, we can feel limited physically,” said Sister Paula. “But we do all we can. The people we meet give us life and joy, and we try to give them a little joy. We strive for that same model as St. Marguerite, of not only bringing Christ to others but seeing and receiving Christ from them.”

St. Marguerite’s namesake schools in both Innisfail and Spruce Grove celebrated her Jan. 12 feast day with a Mass.



Students at St. Marguerite Bourgeoys School in Innisfail celebrate their school's namesake on her feast day Jan. 12. Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

“It’s a reminder to both the students and staff that every one of us is working towards being a saint,” said Peggy Wright, who teaches religion at the Innisfail school. “Because our school is named after her, we take her legacy forward. It’s important to show that to the children every year.

“When we see where she came from, that she wasn’t afraid to say yes to God’s call, we see for ourselves that we can also say yes to God’s call, even when it’s hard.”

Although they have been in Alberta for nearly 50 years, the future of the Congregation of Notre Dame in the province is uncertain.



A prayer card bearing a portrait of St. Marguerite Bourgeoys was published by the Congregation de Notre-Dame for her 400th birthday. Congregation de Notre-Dame

There are two women in the congregation's novitiate but there are no immediate plans to bring more sisters to the province. Like many religious communities, Sister Marie says their vocations have dwindled in Canada. However, their vocations from Central America and Africa have remained steady.

The congregation will host a general chapter in 2021 to determine its direction for the next five years.

Whatever the future holds, Sister Marie and Sister Paula are certain that the impact and influence of St. Marguerite Bourgeoys will remain.

"There are not many young sisters here in Canada, so maybe it will have to go. And we surrender to that too," said Sister Marie. "We will be sorry if it happens. We love Alberta and we've been welcomed here for so many years. But that legacy remains no matter what, especially among the people we've worked with, they'll carry on the spirit of St. Marguerite."