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VISITATION-PENTECOST SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONGREGATION OF NOTRE DAME (St. Marguerite Bourgeoys)¹

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Introduction

Etienne-Michel Faillon, a priest of St. Sulpice, published Jean Jacques Olier's seventeenth-century work entitled *The Interior Life of the Most Holy Virgin* in 1866. Faillon added a footnote to Olier's reflection on the Visitation and the Order of the Visitation recently founded by St. Francis de Sales "to adore in this glorious mystery, graces and virtues that Jesus Christ lavished on His divine mother and through her on the Church."² Faillon noted:

Shortly after this Order was established in France to honour the inner life of this Mystery, God raised up in the city dedicated to Mary, Ville Marie, New France (Canada), a congregation of Christian virgins destined to honour, at one and the same time, the interior life and apostolic zeal that

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¹Ville Marie, now Montreal came into existence in 1642, through the desire of devout men and women in seventeenth-century France who envisioned a colony in New France that would embody the Christian ideal of community described in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 2 and 4.

Marguerite Bourgeoys arrived on November 16, 1653, eleven years after the initial foundation, to fulfill part of the original design for the colony, which included a plan for the education of the children. She came knowing that only one teacher would be needed for several years since many children, unable to withstand the harsh winters, died in infancy. For a complete discussion of Marguerite and her life with the colonists, see Patricia Simpson, *Marguerite Bourgeoys and Montreal* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).

²Jean-Jacques Olier, *Vie intérieure de la Très-Sainte Vierge. Ouvrage recueilli des écrits de M. Olier* (2 vols.; Rome: Salviucci, 1866), 1:313.

Mary manifested in the mystery of the Visitation. These pious women, known as the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame, are consecrated to Mary under her glorious title of Queen of Apostles.³

They go out as missionaries to instruct young people in the parishes of the country in order to honour the apostolic zeal of Mary who carried the knowledge and the love of the Incarnate Word to Saint John.⁴

He added, "Marguerite Bourgeoys presented to her sisters Mary's apostolic zeal evident in the Visitation as a model of how they should carry out their mission in order to contribute to the sanctification of all children."⁵

Faillon's brief portrait of the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame captures the Marian spirituality that inspired Marguerite Bourgeoys and her mission of education—a spirituality that she passed on to those women who gathered around her from 1658 until her death, January 12, 1700, who with her gave shape to the Congregation of Notre Dame. Passed on from generation to generation, this spirituality continues to inspire Vowed Members and Associates of the Congregation on mission for the gospel today.

1. The Development of Visitation-Pentecost Spirituality in the Congregation

To understand the Marian spirituality of the Congregation of Notre Dame we begin with Marguerite's experience of Mary from 1640 to her departure for Canada in 1653. During these years, the seeds for her vision of Mary were planted and were nurtured by her lived experience in Troyes and in her ongoing reflection on the scriptural memory of Mary, especially in Luke-Acts. It would mature in Ville Marie, through her relationship

³For Olier, Mary already appears as "teacher and Queen of Apostles," through her visit to Elizabeth and the saving grace given to St. John in the womb of his mother that established him as the precursor of Jesus. Olier saw Mary as the prototype of apostolic ministry, focused on "carrying the knowledge of the Saviour [to others] and the sanctification of souls" (Olier, *Vie intérieure*, 1:289, 290).

⁴Olier, *Vie intérieure*, 1:313, 314 (n. 1).

⁵Olier, *Vie intérieure*, 1:314. Cf. *The Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, trans. from the French by Mary Virginia Cotter, C.N.D. (Montreal: Congregation of Notre Dame, 1976), 47, 70.

with the colonists and her companions as together they built a new Church for a new world.

Whatever devotion to Mary Marguerite had in her youth, the extraordinary effect that Mary would have on her life began on Rosary Sunday, 1640. In her autobiography, written in 1697, at seventy-seven years of age, Marguerite, recalling the transforming experience of that day, notes that as the procession passed in front of the Benedictine monastery, she glanced up at the stone statue [of the Blessed Virgin] above the portal. For Marguerite, what before was "ordinary" had become "very beautiful." Commenting on that moment, she wrote "I no longer recognized myself. When I returned home, this was apparent to everyone. From that moment I gave myself to God."⁶ The experience had transformed her life.

Another seminal Marian experience occurred before Marguerite's departure for Canada in 1653, during the time when she consulted Church leaders and her family, as she discerned whether to accept the request of the governor of Ville Marie, Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve, that she come to Canada to teach the children of the colonists. Marguerite relates that early one morning she perceived the presence of a woman standing before her and she heard the words, "Go, I will not abandon you." "I knew that it was the Blessed Virgin," she wrote, "although I did not see her face." Later, she noted, "Though I feared illusions, this gave me confidence for the voyage. I said within myself: If it is the will of God, I shall want for nothing."⁷

The clarity with which Marguerite remembers these events suggests that they remained like touchstone experiences for her, memories to which she likely returned again and again in her life to weigh the authenticity of her choices, to find strength for the journey—those moments of light and darkness that would weave the fabric of her life wholly given to God: Mary-like moments of treasuring, pondering over events in her heart (Lk. 2:19, 51). And from the words spoken to Marguerite, "Go, I will not abandon you," rises an echo of the assurance given to Mary by Gabriel at the Annunciation: "Nothing will be impossible with God" (Lk. 1:37).

⁶*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 163.

⁷*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 143, 165-166.

These two decisive events in Marguerite's life are like book-ends which embrace thirteen years of her life in which she searched to uncover her personal vocation. During these years, Marguerite joined the Extern Congregation⁸ of the Congregation Notre Dame, a cloistered teaching community in Troyes—a group which she had avoided previously, lest she appear too pious. There she was exposed to one of the many currents of thought circulating in her day. It was said that this Congregation and other cloistered communities reflected “the state of life represented by Magdalene and Martha, while those women who went out on mission [as she and her companions did] represented and imitated the state of the Blessed Virgin.”⁹

For the women who belonged to the Extern Congregation, Mary, as a role model for instruction¹⁰ and education of the impoverished children and families of Troyes, was a woman concerned, as Jesus had been, for the poor and marginalized of society.¹¹ It is said that Marguerite took this to heart.¹²

⁸This Extern Congregation was a group of Filles Séculières (secular women) who lived at home, made no vows or promises, and went two-by-two to various places to teach school, to give instruction and to perform other spiritual and corporal works of mercy as needed.

⁹Charles de Glandelet (1700–1701), *La Vie de la Soeur Bourgeoys* (2nd ed.; Montreal, Canada: Congregation of Notre Dame, 1993), 38. Cf. *Life of Sister Marguerite Bourgeoys*, trans. from the French by Frances McCann, C.N.D. (2nd ed.), 39.

¹⁰Instruction was the term used for evangelization until the nineteenth century. To instruct meant to educate to Christian living in the spirit of the Beatitudes. It was never separated from teaching, which meant helping children to develop the skills needed to take their place in society. See Marie Azzarello, C.N.D., *Reflection on Instruction in the Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys and Her Contemporaries: Implications for Our Mission Today* (Montreal, Canada: Heritage Series, Congregation of Notre Dame, No. 11, 1993).

¹¹The portrait of Mary presented to the Extern Congregation as their model moved her beyond stereotypical images that portrayed her solely as a model of prayer and solitude, akin to a cloistered nun. The image of Mary in relationship with others was evident in the statues and stained glass windows that adorned the churches in Troyes. Dominant among these were images of the Lucan Visitation; Mary in the midst of the Apostles at Pentecost, center of unity in the fledgling Christian community; Mary with her mother Saint Anne; and Mary with Jesus in relationship with others. .

¹²In keeping with the spirit of the times that saw the cloister as a more perfect way of life, Marguerite sought entrance to Carmel and other cloistered communities, but was refused (*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 164).

In the late 1640s, Father Antoine Gendret, Marguerite's spiritual director, shared with her his dream for a new community. He underlined that only two of the three states of life for women left by Jesus after his resurrection were being fulfilled; namely, that of Martha and Magdalene. But, he added, "the state of life of the journeying Virgin Mary, which must also be honored, was not yet filled."¹³ In Gendret's dream, such persons would be considered true religious while remaining outside of a cloister—"religious without veil or wimple"¹⁴ is the way he put it. Marguerite, who was already carrying out her work as a member of the Extern Congregation in imitation of the state of the Blessed Virgin, found Gendret's proposal very attractive, for she notes, "I had compassion on the young women who for lack of money could not enter the service of God."¹⁵ Two women joined her to found this community. One died; the other left. The project failed.¹⁶

In 1653, when Marguerite left for Canada, Gendret suggested to her that what God had not willed in Troyes, perhaps [God] would bring to pass in Montreal.¹⁷ Five years after her arrival in Ville Marie, in 1658, Marguerite must have recalled these words as the first women joined her from

¹³*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 164.

¹⁴*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 143, 164. Gendret was connected to the Extern Congregation of Notre Dame as chaplain and to Adrien Bourdoise's parish renewal program which was active in Troyes. Bourdoise, a priest attached to the community and seminary of St. Nicholas-du-Chardonnet in Paris, had developed a program whose aim was to restore the spirit of the primitive Christian community in parish life. It is conceivable that Gendret, in his desire to have a community of secular women that would honor the state of Mary's life after the resurrection and ascension of her Son, envisioned a group of women who, through imitation, would continue Mary's presence and active role in the Church. This effort on his part seems to affirm his sense of Mary as a disciple—apostle of Jesus—her active presence and role with the apostles and the first Christian community. This image of Mary appears in authors from as early as the second century, despite scriptural silence about her and the women disciples of Jesus after Pentecost.

¹⁵*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 143, 164. Inability to meet the dowry requirement could account for Marguerite's being refused acceptance by Carmel and other cloistered communities between 1640 and 1653.

¹⁶*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 164.

¹⁷*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 142, 174.

Troyes, accepting to live with her in community as had been planned there.¹⁸

2. The Ville Marie Project

Marguerite, in her Writings, states clearly that the purpose of her Congregation is "to honour the third state of women which Our Lord Jesus Christ left on earth after his resurrection."¹⁹ This serves as a reminder that her experience of imitating Mary as she served the poor in Troyes as a member of the Extern Congregation and the initial inspiration of Father Gendret, her spiritual director in Troyes, remained fresh in her mind and heart. Marguerite reinforced the stated purpose of her Congregation by noting that "the life led by the Blessed Virgin throughout her time on earth ought to have its imitators."²⁰

Towards the end of her life, with years of missionary travel behind her as well as interaction with her companions, the colonists, civil and church authority, Marguerite emphasized that the Congregation's purpose was to honor "the state of life of the journeying Virgin Mary, (her *vie voyageuse*)."²¹ What connection is there then between the Marian spirituality of the Congregation rooted in the Visitation and the imitation of the state of Mary's journeying life, in particular Mary's life after the resurrection?

In her writings, Marguerite presents the accepted theological interpretation of the Visitation, namely, that John, through Mary's visit to his mother Elizabeth, was freed from original sin in her womb. The Blessed Virgin, she says, in visiting Elizabeth "contributed to the sanctification of St. John the Baptist and to the sanctification of his family."²²

While Marguerite considered this to be "the occasion of the greatest miracle ever performed in this world," she stressed that this was the first visit Mary made after the Annunciation.²³

¹⁸*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 174. Marguerite and her companions guided their lives according to the rules drawn up by Father Gendret, assisted by a theologian belonging to the Cathedral Chapter in Troyes, and approved by the Sorbonne in Paris.

¹⁹*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 88.

²⁰*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 142.

²¹*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 88.

²²*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 47, 70.

²³*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 55, 70.

Thus, Marguerite did not perceive the Visitation event as one moment in Mary's life. Rather this Lucan narrative captured for her the whole of Mary's life centered in God and turned towards her neighbor.

Behind Marguerite's reading of the Lucan narrative is a favorite expression found in seventeenth-century spirituality, Mary's "journeying life, in conversation with her neighbor." In the seventeenth century, "the French word 'converser' that we translate as 'conversation' was close to its Latin root word, meaning 'to live with.' It carried the sense of its verb form, that is, 'to turn again and again towards one's neighbour; to be attentive to one's neighbour as a person.'"²⁴ Cardinal Bérulle, a seventeenth-century theologian, used this expression to capture the essence of Jesus' life on earth. "Jesus," he wrote, "through his Incarnation, his journeying life on earth, especially in his public life, passion and death on the Cross, initiated a new conversation between God and humankind."²⁵ In so doing, Jesus was always turned toward his neighbor in conversation, looking beyond appearances to the inner heart of the person, responding to his/her needs, healing, affirming, calling to conversion as the situation required.

For Bérulle, Mary, intimately connected to the whole of Jesus' journeying life—his life in conversation with his neighbor, his teachings, his passion, death and resurrection—had developed the same mind and heart of Jesus (cf. Eph. 3:14-21; Phil. 2:1-11). For this reason, he urged Christians to learn from Mary how to love, to follow Jesus, and to imitate his virtues in their lives according to their personal gifts and the circumstances in which they lived.²⁶

That Marguerite and her companions would learn how to follow Jesus from Mary is clear in her writings. "To discover how to imitate Mary," and by implication Jesus, she writes, "we ought to go through her life and stop at whatever Our Lord in-

²⁴*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 46.

²⁵Pierre de Bérulle, *Oeuvres complètes du Cardinal de Bérulle* (Paris: Antoine Estienne and Sebastien Huré, 1644, 2 vols., reprinted at Montsoulst [Seine-et-Oise]: Maison d'Institution de l'Oratoire, 1960), 1:963-966.

²⁶Bérulle, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:469, 963-965.

spires us to do."²⁷ Marguerite provides us with reflections on the scriptural memory of Mary, always drawing comparisons between her life and that of the Congregation called, like Mary, to live in the spirit of the Visitation, always attentive to God and turned towards their neighbor. In summary, Marguerite called herself and her Congregation to the same attentiveness and openness to God that Mary showed in her life; accompanied by wonder and admiration of God who, as in Mary, does great things in every person (Lk. 1:26-56).²⁸

In her reflections on the gospel narratives of the magi's (Mt. 2: 1-14) and the shepherds' visits to Jesus (Lk. 2:8-20), Marguerite perceived Mary receiving rich and poor people with the same love. In the marriage at Cana, Marguerite moved beyond theology. For her, Mary's presence was due to the fact that "they were poor people and there was a work of charity to do."²⁹ Marguerite in her turn exemplified this attitude towards people in her own life and encouraged her sisters to do likewise.³⁰

There are many other examples. Perhaps they are best captured in her insistence on devotion to the Presence of God and to the Passion. "The Blessed Virgin," she wrote, "followed her Son to the foot of the cross. The sisters must live always in the presence of God, as a mother who loves her child passionately does not lose him from her sight."³¹ Since the Blessed Virgin "experienced all the pain and all the sufferings which her Divine Son bore during His passion," Marguerite encouraged the sisters to meditate often on the sufferings of Christ.³²

When all is said and done, for Marguerite, the best way to imitate the whole of Mary's life on earth, the state of her journeying life or her life in conversation with her neighbor was to keep the Lucan narrative of the Visitation before her eyes and those of her sisters.³³ But, called as they were to imitate Mary's

²⁷*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 52.

²⁸*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 53.

²⁹*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 72.

³⁰*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 71.

³¹*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 73.

³²*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 73.

³³The expressions "journeying life" and "life in conversation with one's neighbor" were interchangeable. But these two concepts cannot be separated. Moving from

life after the resurrection, they would especially learn how to do this from reflection on her presence at Pentecost and her role in the primitive church.³⁴

Since Marguerite saw Mary's relationship with Elizabeth, their mutuality, as a model of all Mary's interactions with others, Marguerite used the lens of the Visitation to shed light on Mary's relationship with the disciples after the crucifixion, her presence in their midst as they gathered in prayer in the Cenacle waiting for Jesus' promise of the Spirit to be fulfilled (Acts 1:14), at the Pentecost event (Acts 2:1ff) and her life in the first Christian community.

For Marguerite, the tender interaction between Mary and Elizabeth, which Mary had shown throughout her life with Jesus, overflowed into Mary's tender care of the disciples who abandoned her Son in His deepest hour of need. So Mary, gathered with the disciples in the Cenacle in prayer, was the mother who gathered and supported her children, a source of hope and strength in the midst of their fear. In the Cenacle, Mary is the remembering mother "who imitated her Son so fully that she kept all His words and actions in her heart so that she might make use of them in the instructions she would give thereafter."³⁵ Mary, the mother who held her child Jesus close to her heart, now cared for the infant Church. Following Pentecost, Mary is the teacher who "instructed the first Christians on every occasion she could to make her Son known and loved, never refusing any journey where charity or necessity needed her help."³⁶

place to place does not necessarily presume that one turns towards one's neighbor and enters into conversation with him or her. Therefore, it is likely more correct to say that the Congregation is called to imitate Mary's *Vie Voyageuse, conversante avec le prochain* (the journeying life of Mary in conversation with her neighbor). Cf. Lorraine Caza, C.N.D., *La vie voyageuse, conversante avec le prochain* (Montréal: Les Éditions Bellarmin, 1982), 51.

³⁴Here, Marguerite found the ideal model for the sisters of her Congregation. Through their mission of education carried out in imitation of Mary, they would live their call to "be Mary" in the Church as they collaborated with the colonists in building the Church in Ville Marie, where their life together recalled that of the primitive Church.

³⁵*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 89.

³⁶*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 50.

Marguerite sums up Mary's role in the primitive Church in her description of *The True Missionary Sister of the Congregation*. Mary, she writes, "was for instruction, a woman who combined Magdalene's characteristics of prayer and penance, and Martha's hospitality within her own person." She was mother and teacher to the newborn Church, which she formed and instructed in all kinds of good by her words and by her example. In so doing, Mary showed that "the poverty and humility she professed were within the reach of all."³⁷

These virtues, viewed with the lens of the Magnificat (Lk. 1: 46-55), point to Marguerite's conviction that she and her Congregation were called like Mary to strive towards an inner freedom needed to root one's identity first and foremost in God. Rising from this text, and indeed throughout her Writings, is Marguerite's sense that these virtues, as it were, form an inner foundation that creates space for hearts to listen, to receive, to be changed by God's word, to be attuned to the Spirit who day-by-day desires to lead all God's daughters and sons into ever deeper love of God and solidarity with their neighbor.

Tied closely to the parallels that Marguerite drew between Mary and the life of the Congregation were those she saw between the sisters' missionary activity and that of the apostles after Pentecost.³⁸ In her mind, to imitate Mary after Pentecost or to imitate the apostles were one and the same thing: to carry the knowledge and love of the Incarnate Word to humankind, the knowledge and love of the Father who sent his Son to assure our permanent communion with Him.³⁹ Marguerite's image of Mary teaching with [the women disciples] especially Magdalene and Martha alongside the apostles in the first Christian community completed the image.⁴⁰ Significantly, Mary as teacher prescribed "the rule of charity to all those who had the honor of following her, even the first Christians, for the love of God and neighbor includes all the law."⁴¹

³⁷*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 77.

³⁸*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 81, 82.

³⁹Caza, *La vie voyageuse, conversant avec le prochain*, 60.

⁴⁰*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 72.

⁴¹*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 50.

It is not surprising then that Marguerite, drawing on Acts 4:32, invites her Congregation to imitate the first Christians who held all things in common. She wrote:

Imitating their example and that of the Blessed Virgin who had the care of the first Christian community after the death of her Son, we must live together in perfect union in the Congregation. Without this union, there is no community. Above all, this must be a union of hearts and minds, that is animated by the same spirit of grace—a spirit of simplicity, littleness and poverty, of detachment from all things and abandonment to God.⁴²

This theme emerges in various places in her Writings, a sign that Marguerite saw that these virtues were essential for her and the members of her Congregation, called to live their lives in imitation of Mary as disciples—apostles of Jesus.

As Marguerite reflected on the Visitation in relation to the whole of Mary's life on earth; especially at Pentecost and in the primitive Church, she overturned the image of Mary as a cloistered nun which had prevailed for centuries. "The Blessed Virgin," she wrote, "was never cloistered but preserved an interior solitude, never excusing herself from any journey where there was some good to be done or some work of charity to be performed."⁴³ Her sisters, in imitation of Mary, were called to do the same: to carry an "inner cloister" in their hearts; to be "vagabonds" going out only for church or for necessity or instruction, or charity—women living in imitation of Mary's "journeying life in conversation with her neighbor."⁴⁴ In choosing the narrative of the Visitation as the patronal feast for her Congregation, Marguerite left her sisters a constant reminder that intimacy with God and mission can never be separated. Contemplation and action form an interlocking dance.

At the same time, Marguerite saw the close link between the fullness of grace that Mary received at the Annunciation and the superabundance of grace that she received at Pentecost.⁴⁵ Though not stated explicitly, Marguerite's reflections on Mary's

⁴²*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 67.

⁴³*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 50, 70.

⁴⁴*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 49, 50.

⁴⁵*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 49.

life following Pentecost and in the first Christian community suggest that she saw the parallel between Mary's visit to Elizabeth after the Annunciation and the missionary thrust that followed the Pentecost event. In light of this, we can propose that Marguerite saw one and the same motif in the Annunciation-Visitation events and in the Pentecost event and the Visitation (as it were) that followed it "to the ends of the earth": to be sent in Jesus' name. Marguerite's insistence on their call to imitate Mary's journeying life and her active involvement in the first Christian community supports this conclusion. For a sister of the Congregation, the call to imitate Mary in the Visitation can never be separated from her call to imitate Mary at Pentecost, in reality the whole of Mary's life on earth. Here, the Lucan narratives of the Visitation and Pentecost stand before the members of the Congregation as a constant reminder to the sisters that individually and communally in the Congregation and in the community of Church, they are to live mindful that intimacy with God and service in the name of the gospel are one and the same call.

3. The Struggle for Church Approval

Marguerite, from her conversion in 1640, had lived her life as she thought Mary would have lived hers. That her first companions caught this spirit is evident from the Congregation's struggle with the Bishop of Quebec, Bishop St. Vallier. In 1694, he presented Marguerite and her companions with his desire to impose a rule of life that would enforce cloister on her Congregation. This would alter its character and facilitate his intention to merge her Congregation with the cloistered Ursuline Order in Quebec City.

The written exchanges that followed between Marguerite and Father Tronson, the superior of the Sulpicians in France who knew the Congregation well, and Bishop St. Vallier underline the conviction of Marguerite and her companions that cloister and solemn vows were incompatible with their call to honor the state of the journeying Virgin Mary while she was on earth.⁴⁶ This conviction is evident in a letter to Bishop St. Vallier dated

⁴⁶*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 164, 173.

November 2, 1695. Marie Barbier, who had replaced the aging Marguerite Bourgeoys as superior, writing to him in the name of the community states, "I entreat your Lordship that we have no other constitutions than the life of the Blessed Virgin."⁴⁷

In April of 1697, the crisis was resolved. Bishop St. Vallier assured the Congregation that it would remain an autonomous community of uncloistered women. On June 24, 1698, as Marguerite and her companions signed the acceptance of the Rules adjusted to support their way of life, the Congregation of Notre Dame became the first non-cloistered community in North America.

Jean Jacques Olier, the founder of the Sulpicians, commenting on the work of Marguerite and her companions in Ville Marie, said that "the Congregation made present in this new Christian [environment], the role the Blessed Virgin had in the formation of the Church; a role which men entirely overlooked and which we hardly ever think about."⁴⁸ Faillon sums this up by saying that "the first sisters of the Congregation were convinced that their vocation was the work of Mary and that they should imitate her life of zeal after the Ascension. Through Christian education of children, the Congregation retraced the zeal of Mary to establish and to strengthen the church, in their case, the new born church in Ville Marie."⁴⁹

4. The Congregation: Post-Seventeenth Century

Marguerite Bourgeoys died January 12, 1700. Following her death, the memory of her life assuredly nurtured that of the

⁴⁷Letter to Bishop St. Vallier, dated November 2, 1695, in *Histoire de La Congrégation de Notre Dame*, ed. by Soeur Saint Henriette, C.N.D. (Montreal, Canada: Congregation of Notre Dame, 1910-1941), 2:101.

⁴⁸Étienne-Michel Faillon, *Vie de la Soeur Bourgeoys* (Ville Marie: Chez les Soeurs de la Congrégation de Notre Dame, 1853), 2:498.

Faillon added his own observation. "It is true," he wrote, "that the apostles never showed the Church the influence that the Blessed Virgin had in her formation. . . . But after them, the doctors in the first centuries spoke highly of the effectiveness of the Blessed Virgin's activity in promoting the Gospel." . . . "Marguerite's life," he wrote, "was a tangible sign of the power which Mary exercised in the formation of the Church. This same vocation showed itself equally in that of her first companions." (2:511-512).

⁴⁹Faillon, *Vie de la Soeur Bourgeoys*, 2:511, 512.

Congregation. This memory was sustained by the conviction of her companions that they were called, like her, to imitate Mary through the mission of education, thereby, prolonging Mary's presence in the Church and in the world in which they lived. In turn, this spirit initiated new members into the Congregation's Marian Spirituality.

Two books written in the early 1700s by Father Charles de Glandelet, Marguerite's spiritual director in Ville Marie, would perpetuate the memory of her life and the spirit of her Congregation for future generations.⁵⁰ They would preserve for the Congregation his observation that "all [Marguerite's] desires, her undertakings in the development of her Congregation were in order that it would be a faithful imitator of the Virgin of Dialogue among people."⁵¹

Since the Bishop limited membership in the Congregation to eighty women until 1843, the missions were in close proximity to the Mother House. This proximity provided ample opportunity for conversations among the sisters on the missions on their lived experience of their Marian vocation as a way of following the gospel. It also facilitated communication between the sisters and the Superior General and her Council. The lifting of this restriction led to an increase in membership, expansion of the missions, and eventually, the introduction of religious provinces.⁵² This period also brought new ways of communication within the Congregation.

Beginning in 1864, in addition to official visits to the missions, the Superiors General wrote to the sisters at Christmas and Easter, for the feast days of Mary; especially that of the

⁵⁰Charles de Glandelet (1700-1701), *The True Spirit of the Institute of the Secular Sisters of the Congregation de Notre Dame Established in Ville Marie on the Island of Montreal in Canada*, trans. from the French by Frances McCann, C.N.D. (Montreal: Congregation of Notre Dame, 1977). *The Life of Sister Marguerite Bourgeoys*, trans. from the French by Florence Quigley, C.N.D. (2nd ed.; Montreal: Congregation of Notre Dame, 1994).

⁵¹Glandelet, *The True Spirit of the Institute*, 15. Cf. Glandelet, *Le vray esprit...*, 14. The French text reads "une fidèle copie de la très Sainte Vierge conversante parmi le prochain."

⁵²Statistics show that the Congregation registered 63 sisters in 1800. By 1900, the number of sisters grew to 1,192, serving 26,000 students.

Visitation, offering them reflections on their way of life in a Marian Congregation. These letters are a testament to the ongoing conviction that the Congregation was called to be a faithful copy of Mary, her life in Visitation, centered in God and turned towards her neighbor. Again and again, the sisters are urged never to lose the primitive spirit.⁵³ They are encouraged to practice all the maxims by which Mother Bourgeoys would honor the different states of Mary's life, especially during the years following the Ascension.⁵⁴ Many of these letters assure the sisters that they can count on the help of Mary who from the beginning of the Congregation was their "Founder, Teacher, Mother, First Superior." Some offer encouragement to the sisters by reminding them that the assurance of Mary's support to Marguerite as she prepared to depart for Canada, "Go, I will never abandon you," was also given to them. So too were Mary's words to the servants at Cana, "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn. 2:5).⁵⁵

To live like Mary, the sisters, in keeping with Marguerite's desire, are urged to study her life in order that with God's grace they will learn how to imitate Jesus from Mary, the perfect exemplar of Jesus and their model. The singular importance of the rule of charity in the life of the Congregation appears often in the letters. In various ways they present Marguerite's desire, expressed in her Writings and in her Maxims, that imitation of Mary could be summed up in fulfilling the double commandment of charity toward God and neighbor. This commandment was to have first place in the sisters' lives, it must be the beginning, the progress, and the end of all their actions.⁵⁶

⁵³In 1898, the sisters were presented with brochures describing St. Louis de Montfort's "Treatise on True Devotion to Mary" as a means of renewing their devotion to Mary. A caution accompanied their distribution: "But this devotion should never infringe upon the freedom of the apostle of Mary" (Circular Letter 3, Feast of the Purification of Mary, 1898: Mother St. Sabine [Lessieur], Superior General, 1897-1903).

⁵⁴Cf. *Maxims and Virtues of the Blessed Marguerite Bourgeoys, Foundress of the Congregation of Notre Dame of Montreal* (Montreal, Canada: Bureau Marguerite Bourgeoys, 1953), 95, 96.

⁵⁵Many of these letters address the living out of specific points of the Constitutions, the challenges of living the vows and ongoing concerns about the instruction of the students in their care.

⁵⁶Marguerite's Maxims point out that, drawing on the Old Testament, but in a spiritual sense, the double commandment must be written on our sisters' foreheads, on our hands, on our clothing, in our houses—read even on the very threshold of our doors (p. 60).

In this spirit, the sisters were reminded continuously that they are called to live united in mind and heart as Mary and the first Christians did, conforming to the same spirit of grace: a spirit of littleness, simplicity, docility, obedience, poverty, detachment from everything which is not of God and total surrender to Divine Providence. These virtues were never seen as an end in themselves. Rather they were presented as interior dispositions that facilitate intimacy with and attentiveness to God, the inner freedom to go wherever they were needed to make Jesus known and loved. So also, was Mary's "Visitation" to Elizabeth a constant reminder of the zeal with which the sisters should respond to requests for new missions for education and evangelization at the primary, secondary and college levels. And until Vatican II, Mary was always perceived as "Mediatrice of All Grace."

5. Vatican II and Beyond

Given its Marian spirituality, reflection on Scripture always had its place in the life of the Congregation. With Vatican II, new insights emerged into the scriptural memory of Mary, her faith journey, and her life as a disciple of Jesus as well as his mother. These insights influenced the reflections that leadership offered to our Congregation. They enhanced the revision of our Constitutions, wherein parallels are drawn among the scriptural memory of Mary's life as a disciple—apostle of Jesus, Marguerite's vision of Mary, and our lives committed to God as members of the Congregation.⁵⁷

Over the years, the Congregation's identity was secure as an Apostolic Marian Congregation, "a small Plot in the Garden of the Church."⁵⁸ The strong influence of its presence in Christian formation at all levels of education, in concert with the institutional Church, made it unnecessary to highlight that the purpose of the Congregation was imitation of Mary's life in the foundation of the Church after the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. For the sisters of the Congregation, the narrative of the Visitation gave meaning to their lives.

⁵⁷The Constitutions revised in 1977 received final approval by Rome in 1984.

⁵⁸*Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys*, 63.

With Vatican II, the Congregation's mission expanded beyond the school. In keeping with the early years of the Congregation, several small communities of sisters were formed in neighborhoods of impoverished people. At the same time, changes emerged in culture, in society, in the way the sisters saw themselves as women in the Church. This new reality sparked the desire to re-visit a section of Marguerite's writings—namely, the influence that Mary's presence at Pentecost and in the first Christian community had on the foundation of our Congregation. What significance did this have for the Congregation in these times? Acting on this desire, the Congregation's leaders offered material for reflection on Mary at Pentecost and on her life in the first Christian community in relation to our lives today.⁵⁹ The connection between the narratives of the Visitation and Pentecost was re-established. Our call to be Mary for the Church in today's world, through imitation of her "journeying life in conversation with her neighbor" was renewed.

6. Visitation-Pentecost Spirituality in a New World

Visitation-Pentecost spirituality continually calls vowed members and associates to fidelity to the original inspiration of the Congregation of Notre Dame—a call to perpetuate the spirit of Mary in the Church and in the world through imitation of her "journeying life in conversation with her neighbor," as they set out individually and communally in service of the gospel. This spirituality, in turn, inspires the living out of the Congregation's "Mission Orientation"—a commitment to follow Jesus in a preferential option for the poor and to live out the mission of liberating education in fidelity to the prophetic charism of Marguerite Bourgeoys in today's world.⁶⁰ It invites them to live strongly convinced of the power of the Spirit to act in them to

⁵⁹Circular Letter, May 31, 1994. This reflection offered by Madeleine Rochette, C.N.D., Congregation Leader, and the Members of the General Administration included contributions by several sisters and associates. The Influence of Chapter 8 of the Constitution on the Church and the apostolic letters on Mary issued by Popes Paul VI and John Paul II was evident.

⁶⁰The Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame, "Mission Orientation," General Chapter, 1996.

bring about their own transformation, so that mutuality and interdependence, reconciliation and communion govern their relationship with one another and with all creation. It calls them to be attentive to the Spirit present in every person, alive in creation and often waiting to speak an evangelizing word to them. It urges them, through collaboration with others, to work towards the transformation of the Church and the world. For, as in Marguerite's time, Visitation-Pentecost spirituality in the Congregation impels members to make their contribution alongside others to build a new Church for a new world.