

Saint Marguerite d'Youville

Feast: October 16

Patron: widows, difficult marriages, death of young children

Died: 1771

We learn compassion from allowing our lives to be influenced by compassionate people, by seeing life from their perspectives, and by reconsidering our own values.

Born in Varennes, Canada, Marie Marguerite Dufrost de Lajemmerais had to interrupt her schooling at the age of 12 to help her widowed mother. Eight years later she married François d'Youville; they had six children, four of whom died young. Despite the fact that her husband gambled, sold liquor illegally to Native Americans, and treated her indifferently, she cared for him compassionately until his death in 1730.

Even though she was caring for two small children and running a store to help pay off her husband's debts, Marguerite still helped the poor. Once her children were grown, she and several companions rescued a Quebec hospital that was in danger of failing. She called her community the Institute of the Sisters of Charity of Montreal; the people called them the "Grey Nuns" because of the color of their habits. In time, a proverb arose among the poor people of Montreal, "Go to the Grey Nuns; they never refuse to serve." In time, five other religious communities traced their roots to the Grey Nuns.

The General Hospital in Montreal became known as the Hôtel Dieu (House of God) and set a standard for medical care and Christian compassion. When the hospital was destroyed by fire in 1766, Mère Marguerite knelt in the ashes, led the *Te Deum*—a hymn to God's providence in all circumstances—and began the rebuilding process. She fought the attempts of government officials to restrain her charity and established the first foundling home in North America.

Pope Saint John XXIII, who beatified Mère Marguerite in 1959, called her the “Mother of Universal Charity.” She was canonized in 1990, and her liturgical feast is celebrated on October 16.