Ste. Marguerite: Model for Leaders in Catholic Education

INTRODUCTION

Good morning. As we begin this day, let us pause to pray and reflect on our call to lead in Catholic education, in light of the life and legacy of Ste. Marguerite d’Youville, whose feast we celebrate today.

St. Marguerite was born October 15, 1701 at Varennes, Quebec, the first of six children. With the death of her father in 1708, she became her mother’s right hand helper until leaving at age eleven to be educated by the Ursuline Sisters at Montreal. Two years later, she returned to educate her own younger siblings, learning to care for others at her mother’s side. The family eventually moved to Montreal, where Marguerite was married at age twenty to François d’Youville. They had six children, four of whom died at infancy. She suffered much as his excessive drinking, harsh disposition and illegal trade in alcohol for furs gradually came to light. François died seven years after their union, leaving Marguerite with his debts and two young children to care for, all before age thirty.

With great resiliency, Marguerite opened a small shop to pay off her husband’s creditors, while educating her children. Moved by the plight of the poor and needy of her community, she began collecting funds to help feed and clothe them. By 1737, she and three friends were caring for the sick in her home. They were criticized by neighbours and family and openly taunted for bringing society’s undesirables into their area.

All seemed lost when fire destroyed Marguerite’s home at the end of January, 1745. Undaunted, she and her friends signed a commitment two days later, uniting them to work for God and the poor. They persisted without a permanent home, moving three times in two years. Their dedication to the poor and sick became more widely recognized during this time. In 1747, the forty-six year old Marguerite was asked to take over as administrator of the Montreal General Hospital, which was in financial straits and in need of repair. She and her sisters resumed their care for Montreal’s sick and suffering there; donations and help flowed in, and the hospital’s finances were gradually brought back into balance.

Marguerite and her companions eventually took vows and gathered a community of sisters, afire with love for Christ in their suffering neighbours. With the Grey Sisters, the old and sick, abandoned babies, prostitutes and the poor found doors and hearts opened to their needs. When the hospital burned down in the great Montreal fire of 1765, another was built within six months.

Marguerite d’Youville died December 23, 1771 surrounded by her sisters. At her beatification in 1959, Pope St. John XXIII gave her the title, “Mother of Universal Charity.” She was canonized in 1990, the first Canadian-born saint.

T. Cosentino, Renfrew County CDSB, 2015.
The apostolate of Ste. Marguerite and her companions has borne tremendous fruit down through the ages. Her ongoing “yes” to God’s call continues to touch lives through the hospitals and Catholic schools where her sisters have nursed, taught and administered in Canada, the US and beyond. Their charism, to reveal God’s love in a life of service informs and unifies the deep structure of relationships within the institutions where they have served. It has enabled these institutions to respond dynamically and with one heart to the needs of the poor and suffering in a changing world.

Marguerite’s call was nurtured by the faith and love of her family, her Catholic education, the support of like-hearted sisters and benefactors, and an ongoing relationship with God in prayer.

Let us begin our prayer with gratitude and praise to God for this humble leader and servant of the poor and for her legacy, which continues to be with us to this day.

OPENING PRAYER
Let us begin our prayer: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear God, you call us forth to leadership of loving service, and shower us with the grace to respond fruitfully. Today, as we remember St. Marguerite, grant that we might be transformed by your Holy Spirit to lead and serve according to her steadfast example. We make our prayer to you through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

And now, let us be attentive to God’s word.

READING
A Reading from the Gospel of John (Jn 15: 12-18)
This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

REFLECTION
This reading comes from Jesus’ “farewell discourse” in the Gospel of John. Jesus is saying goodbye to his followers. His final words direct, encourage and comfort them before his approaching death. He sums up for them his entire Gospel with the command, “love one another as I have loved you.”
This new commandment calls Christ’s followers to animate their relationships with his love as they carry on his evangelizing mission through successive ages. It is to become the core principle of the emerging Church, to inform its deep structure, if you will, animating all who share in its proclamation of the Gospel.

All who are part of Catholic education’s mission – from support staff to Trustees – share in Christ’s call to animate the deep structure of our organizations with his love. We cannot answer this call alone; it is simply beyond our own strengths. It requires that we be renewed as individuals and as a worshipping community – sustained, nourished and strengthened in our encounter with Christ in daily prayer, in the liturgical life of the Church, and supported in the company of like-minded servant leaders and friends.

We recall the example of Ste. Marguerite, whose daily choice to walk in the path of Christ-like love led her to a shared life of humble service. Like Ste. Marguerite, we will encounter obstacles along the way, and must cling to the knowledge that Christ has chosen us. He has furnished us with the grace to bear fruit that will last, if we but ask it of the Father in his name.

May our walk as servants and leaders in the Catholic school system be encouraged by Ste. Marguerite’s example and animated with the same spirit of loving service that continues to guide her sisters to this day.

Ste. Marguerite, Mother of Universal Charity, bright light burning with Christ’s love, pray for us!

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL
Let us pray for the Church. That all who follow Jesus might embrace his call to loving service in his name.
We pray to the Lord. Lord, hear our prayer.

Let us pray for the world. That the structures within families, communities and nations might be ever more deeply animated by the witness of persons who have said “yes” to the call to love.
We pray to the Lord. Lord, hear our prayer.

Let us pray for those who suffer in our families, communities and wider world. That people might say “yes” to the call to love planted in their hearts, to welcome and serve them as brothers and sisters in their needs.
We pray to the Lord. Lord, hear our prayer.

Let us pray for ourselves and those whom we serve. That we might never lose sight of the mission to which we are called, holding fast to the love of Christ and faith of his Church to sustain and guide us in our labours.
We pray to the Lord. Lord, hear our prayer.
Let us pray for the Grey Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. In thanksgiving for their “yes” to Christ’s call to love and serve, and for its lasting fruits in our lives, especially their leadership by example in education and health care.
We pray to the Lord. *Lord, hear our prayer.*

For our own needs, and those of all we hold in our hearts.
We pray to the Lord. *Lord, hear our prayer.*

And let us unite all these prayers spoken aloud and in our hearts and bring them before the Father, using the words that Jesus gave us: *Our Father…*

**CLOSING PRAYER**
Let us pray. Lord, we thank you for raising up Marguerite d’Youville to shine with the light of Christ’s love for the sick and poor. Help us to follow her tireless example, so that the love of Christ might animate our work and its structures as we answer his call to lead and serve in Catholic education. We make this prayer to you through this same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

And may Almighty God bless us: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.