

Odds are at some point when you were a child, you were asked the question “what do you want to be when you grow up?” And more than likely the answer to that question changed as the years went by, but at a certain point, we also came to realize that we were being called to something particular in life. And what we also learned is that once we discerned what we were called to, it required a bit of effort. Namely listening to God’s voice; for sometimes we discern one thing but get the message wrong, and need to ponder what God is telling us. And then we have to act, for God’s mission isn’t one we postpone. And we persevere, knowing that the mission takes time to complete and God’s plans take time to fulfill, but with hard work God will use us to do amazing things.

In the 17th century as settlers came to North America, among them was the woman who would become the first female saint from the Catholic Church in Canada, Marguerite Bourgeoys. Much like Elizabeth Ann Seton who would follow her about 100 years later, she would be a trailblazer. She founded one of the first uncloistered religious orders for women in the world. And the order that she founded, the Congregation of Notre-Dame de Montreal, is still thriving. In fact she is considered to be one of the founders of the city of Montreal.

However, none of this was easy.

She was born in northern France, into a middle class family, and had to assume the responsibility of caring for the household when her mother died. As a young woman, she was always devout in her faith, but she didn’t feel initially called to religious life. A monastery in town had religious sisters that helped the poor, but were cloistered. The nuns were not allowed to teach outside the cloister. The nuns would train lay people in a “sodality” to help reach poor young girls.

Though not a part of the religious community, she knew a sister there, Louise Chomedey, who had a brother who happened to be the governor of Montreal in what was called “New France.” The governor, Paul Chomedey, asked his sister for help in finding a teacher for the settlement. Louise suggested Marguerite, who had become the leader of the group of teachers in Troyes, the town in which she lived.

Marguerite had been teaching by that point for a little over a decade, and at one point she experienced a calling during a church procession; it was said she was “touched by Mary” during a procession on the feast of the Holy Rosary. It was then she decided to consecrate herself to God. She entered the extern community as it was called, and taught in the suburbs for several years until she met the governor. The governor requested her to come to Canada, and she was asked to start a school in what was then Ville-Marie, or today is Montreal. She would be here the rest of her life, educating immigrants.

She made the journey to Canada, and when she got there she began the construction of a chapel, the Chapel of Our Lady of Good Counsel, inspired by the Virgin Mary who had told her, “Go, I will not abandon you.”

Christian education of children had only just begun 4 years prior. Sister Marguerite though dove in, and devoted herself to social work with young families and also with women who had come to Canada to marry settlers. She'd visit the sick, bury the dead, teach the faith to settlers, and got the nickname "the Mother of the colony."

But the difficulties were many. She made three voyages back to France which were difficult, and endured poverty, attacks from the Iroquis Native Americans, and the dangers of being in the wilderness. There was a fire that destroyed her small village; plagues on the ships that took her to France. And then the problem of her own bishop.

Now at this point she wasn't in a religious order, and the women she was working with weren't technically religious sisters; they were secular. But she was still affiliated with the Church, as a community, and so in 1679, her bishop said she had to join her Congregation of Notre Dame with its teaching sisters to a cloistered religious order of Ursulines. This was not the first time she'd heard this command. Maybe he wanted to protect the sisters he thought, or just thought women weren't called to actively teach, but bishops in this era long wanted to fit Marguerite into the usual mold of cloistered orders. She though knew God was calling her to the active life, and was not deterred. She was able to recruit other women from France who came. She helped open schools, and continued this work, which finally opened up the eyes of the bishop.

The women she recruited were bold. They were willing to live in huts and do whatever needed to be done to help people. Marguerite continued to set up many schools in the Canadian wilderness, and the bishop finally figured it out. He said to her "I cannot doubt, Mother Bourgeoys, that you will succeed in moving heaven and earth as you have moved me." And so her congregation wouldn't be cloistered but would be an active teaching order, one of the first of its kind for women. It would take a few more years, but eventually it became a fully approved religious order.

In many ways her story echos that of Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first saint from the United States. In her life she lost her husband, dealt with the stress of living in a new nation that was quite anti-Catholic at the time, dealt with gossip of locals when they found out she was Catholic and teaching their kids, dealt with harsh living conditions, and the pains of trying to establish the Catholic school system along with running a new religious community. But just like Mother Marguerite and frankly most all of the saints, she never gave up.

And what has happened? Because of these holy women saying "yes" to their mission, so many souls were helped. People learned the faith and got an education. People came to know Jesus. The world was made a better place through their efforts at helping the poor and needy and the sick. But it took determination, listening, and executing the plan.

As we start a new year today, our Gospel takes us to the start of the life of Jesus, and the beginning of a new chapter in Mary's life as she has given birth to her son. She gazes upon the newborn infant and the shepherds visit her. And there's a few things that stand out; namely how the shepherds go in haste, how the people are astonished

at what the shepherds say, and how Mary treasured these things in her heart. And each one of these things gives us some insight into how we, too, live out our mission.

With respect to haste, the shepherds go in haste to Bethlehem. What this tells us is that when you discern a message from God, or sense that God is sending you on a mission or wants you to do something, you have to act. Certainly one discerns, but there comes a point to act. So what is God calling you to do? Maybe you've discerned your mission, but God is calling you to do something new or different. Maybe you're being called to make a change in your life. Don't wait your whole life or keep making excuses; rather pick up the ball and run when you hear God saying "time to do this" or "time to do that different." I certainly would not want to board a ship and go across the ocean living in Marguerite's time, but she did. So what is God calling you to do? Perhaps (and likely) it's difficult - don't hem and haw but go.

Second, there is the pondering, or astonishment, which comes when the shepherds speak. This is why prayer and silence are so important. To get the mission, you have to listen. This also means listening to people and messengers. A good thing to make a resolution to do as a new year begins is to be a better listener; to make time to hear the voice of God. To listen to your family and to what they are trying to tell you, or to what is maybe weighing on their hearts but they are having a hard time saying; to the messages that loved ones give you. Sometimes when we do this, it helps us to help people better, but it also opens our eyes to the mission ahead and what God is calling us to do next. Saint Marguerite felt called to teach; but now God wanted her to go on a new adventure and help others and help the Church to change, and she had to listen to God when she was in that procession and in her prayer life.

Lastly, we are told Mary treasured these things in her heart. She reflects. So you've got your mission, great. So you are carrying it out in haste, great. But don't go on auto pilot. Think about what you are called to do and how it is being carried out. Maybe God is calling you to do something more. Or maybe he's saying you need to do this differently. Sister Marguerite was always open to that change; open to going back to France to recruit more women; open to having the fortitude to say to the bishop that he had to think things differently (who himself was open to doing that); open to change. Sometimes stubbornness, from how we parent to how we work to how we volunteer, can be a big obstacle to growth and new chapters in our lives God wants to write with us. I went through seminary, but I'm always striving to improve on who I am as a priest, and as a human being. I treasure my vocation and the gifts God has given me, but I know I must always strive to carry them out better.

Just this weekend we lost Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and in reading about his life, I read in the conclave when he was elected pope, he prayed he would not be elected. But he then said he would accept this if God wanted him to serve the church in a different way. Throughout his life, he didn't have it easy; he lost his cousin when the Nazis took him and killed him because he had Down Syndrome. He was a POW as well after being forced into the army which he deserted because he hated the evil of the Nazis; his family was harassed for being anti-Nazi. And like Saint Marguerite he'd also push the

Church to make some changes. But, often speaking in recent years about preparing for his judgment, he was driven, as all holy men and women are, but his mission, knowing God put him on this earth for a reason. So how about you and me? With a new year comes new resolutions, new hopes, new dreams, but also new marching orders. So let us be open to what God is telling us to do, ponder and treasure it, be astonished by what God has given us and calls us to do, and not be afraid to get to work.