

Centre for the Cause of the Venerable Élisabeth Bruyère

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One Hundred and Eighty Winters Ago ...

Compassion: The Spiritual Legacy of the Venerable Élisabeth Bruyère



*180th Anniversary of Foundation
of the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa
February 20
1845-2025*

The inspiring story of the Venerable Élisabeth Bruyère's and her companions' contribution to the Church of Bytown, now the Church of Ottawa, to the Church of Canada began very modestly one hundred and eighty years ago, during the winter of 1845 ... on February 20th to be exact ... and it continues to this day to inspire Sisters and Associates to the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa and the many lay collaborators of the Congregation in various sectors of the periphery of society, whether it be in health care, education, social services, promotion of social justice and social innovation or in the apostolate of prayer offered for the Church and the faithful. Sister Élisabeth Bruyère's mission was supported by grace. The Sisters' arrival brought the warmth of their compassion, the audacity of their unconditional, unwavering and heroic faith in Divine Providence and the flame of their hope amid despair. The mission of love, service and compassion began.

Bytown 1845 ... A Shanty Town in Desperate Need

In 1845, Bytown was in serious need of health care, education and social services such as support services for the elderly and young orphans. There were absolutely no infrastructures in place. Bishop Patrick Phelan of Kingston, the diocese in which Bytown was located, in agreement with Father Adrien Telmon, O.M.I., initiated a request to the Bishop of Montreal, Bishop Ignace Bourget, to explore the possibility of inviting the Grey Nuns of Montreal, the spiritual daughters of Marguerite d'Youville known for their dedication to the needy, to come to Bytown to offer these services.

Sister Élisabeth Bruyère generously accepted the call given to her by her superiors on February 5th 1845. Astonished to receive this assignment, Sister Élisabeth Bruyère saw in this nomination the expression of God's will. At 26 years of age, Sister Élisabeth Bruyère and her small team of three young Grey Nuns, a postulant and an aspirant bravely journeyed from Montreal to Bytown by sleigh upon the frozen Ottawa River, arriving on February 20th, 1845 as the bells of the cathedral rang out and the population of Bytown ventured by sleigh to welcome them ... one hundred and eighty winters ago.

“The privileged path to serve God is to serve our brothers and sisters in need.”¹ The Sisters responded to an invitation launched by Pope Francis in 2014 immediately upon their arrival in Bytown; the sisters opened their hands and their hearts to those in need. Pain never failed to resonate in their heart, even amid the availability of meager financial resources. Barely 3 months after the Sisters’ arrival, the first bilingual school in Ontario, a General Hospital, the seedling of what is known today as **Santé Bruyère Health**, a home for the aged, an orphanage and a home for foundlings came into existence. Sister Bruyère’s pastoral initiatives responded to the urgent needs discerned in Bytown: classes for the children and for mothers, home visits to the poor and the sick, assistance to the dying. The most demanding health care challenge was yet to come: within two years, in 1847, Sister Bruyère and the Sisters would defy the risk of deadly contagion and tend to the sick as Bytown found itself in the midst of a severe typhus epidemic which resulted from the arrival of the Irish emigrants who had fled plague-stricken Ireland during the Great Irish Famine.

The Gift of the Charism of Compassion ... Bytown and Beyond

Sister Élisabeth Bruyère and her companions lived a balance of contemplation and concern for others (*EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, Art. 288)². They effectively lived the Gospel in their daily life. “I was sick and you visited me ...” (Mathew 25:43). They incarnated Marguerite d’Youville’s charism of compassion for the poor within the context of a new apostolate: education, a priority need in Bytown. The Congregation’s distinctive character gradually became evident: on the one hand service to the poor, the forsaken, the suffering; and on the other hand, education adapted to all levels of society and to all human needs. Sensitive to the spiritual needs of the Church and to the social needs of the citizens of Bytown and beyond, she opened new houses, not only in Ontario and Quebec, but also in the U.S. to provide schools for the Franco-American population.

The Sisters of Charity of Ottawa Continue Her Mission

The seed planted in Bytown has grown to full stature and the small community of 1845 has extended its branches widely. Faithful to the spirit of their caring and daring Founder, by Mother Élisabeth Bruyère, the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa continue her mission, her charism and her spirituality.

They join their charism of compassion to the evangelization mission of the Church, happy to be witnesses of the Eternal Father’s loving tenderness and messengers of hope and salvation. Daughters of the Church, to this day, they go to the peripheries to share the Good News in Canada, the U.S., Lesotho, Republic of South Africa, Malawi, Zambia, Japan and Brazil. In the past, they also went to Haiti, Papua-New Guinea, Thailand, the Republic of South Africa and Cameroon.

En Route Toward Canonization ... In God’s Time

Mother Élisabeth Bruyère’s life was a true quest to reveal God’s compassion ... a journey toward holiness. She entrusted herself fully to the Providence of God, the Eternal Father. The process toward Mother Bruyère’s Canonization opened in 1978. Her entire life of service and compassion was a function of her faith,

¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140705_molise-omelia.html 2025.02.06.

² https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html 2025.02.06.

her hope and her love of God. She demonstrated these virtues in a heroic manner. On April 14, 2018, His Holiness, Pope Francis declared the Servant of God, Mother Élisabeth Bruyère, to be Venerable, thereby opening the path to her eventual Beatification and Canonization ... in God's good time.

Conclusion

It is a privilege for the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa to celebrate their 180th anniversary of foundation during this year of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025, celebrated under the theme *SPES NON CONFUNDIT*. "Hope does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5)³. We give thanks to God for the 180 years of compassion offered by the thousands of women who walked in Jesus' footsteps while living the spiritual legacy of the Venerable Élisabeth Bruyère. They respond to the invitation to become **pilgrims of hope** with the same courage and confidence demonstrated by Sister Élisabeth Bruyère and her companions,

ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY WINTERS AGO.



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« I have sufficient confidence to believe in the possibility of miracles if it is God's will. » (Mother Élisabeth Bruyère, October 3, 1865.)

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³ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html