

VENERABLE DÉLIA TÉTREULT (1865-1941)

“**F**or God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). Over a hundred years ago, these words deeply touched the heart of Délia Tétreault. In 1916 she wrote: “God has given us everything, even his Son. What better means of repaying him – as much as a weak creature can do in this world – than by giving him sons, the chosen, who also will sing his mercy forever and ever?”

Awestruck by the unmerited love that God has for us, Délia Tétreault responded with gratitude. A woman with a universal heart, Mother Mary of the Holy Spirit (her religious name) was the founder of the first female missionary institute in Canada and played a decisive and undeniable role for the missionary Church. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in Canada and in particular in Québec, the Church occupied a prominent position in a society marked by Jansenism, in which women were hardly recognized. The means of social communication were still quite undeveloped and the written word played a major role in the transmission of news. In this socio-ecclesial context, Délia Tétreault, inspired by the Holy Spirit, brought a breath of fresh air to her society. Her bold vision and creative action contributed to the opening of her country and her Church to the world.

Délia was born on February 4, 1865, in Sainte-Marie de Monnoir, today Marieville, Québec. Frail in health and orphaned by her mother, she was adopted by her aunt Julie and her godfather Jean Alix at the age of two and lived a happy childhood. From a young age, Délia loved to hide in the barn reading the *Annals of the Holy Childhood* and of *the Propagation of the Faith*,

which she found in an old chest. The missionary narratives fascinated her and the first fruits of her vocation began to take shape. At that time, she had an inspired dream: “I was next to the bed, and suddenly I saw a field of ripe wheat that stretched as far as the eye could see. At a certain moment all those spikes turned into children’s heads, and I immediately understood that they represented souls of ‘pagan’ children.”

The visit of some missionaries from the Canadian Northwest deeply moved her heart. She said, “Although I felt an inexpressible admiration for the apostolic life, I would never have dared to undertake it. Indeed, apostolic life did not seem possible to me, since there was no community of religious missionaries in Canada.” At eighteen, after being refused by the Carmel of Montreal, she entered the Sisters of Charity of St. Hyacinth, but an epidemic sent her home. A decisive event marked her brief time in that community. “One evening,” she recounted, “while I was with the postulants in a small room, it seemed to me that Our Lord told me that I should later found a congregation of women for the foreign missions, and work toward the foundation of a similar society of men, a Seminary for the Foreign Missions modelled on the one in Paris.”

Some years passed when she met Fr. John Forbes, a missionary in Africa. Délia planned to leave for Africa with him, but she fell ill the very night of their planned departure. Jesuit Father Almiré Pichon, helped her found *Bethany*, a project dedicated to social works in Montreal. Troubled by doubts, she worked there for ten years but felt that the Lord was calling her to something else. Later at Bethany, Délia met Fr. Gustave Bourassa and Jesuit Fr. A.M. Daigneault, both missionaries from Africa, who supported her in her missionary desire. Other men and women of God, especially Archbishop Paul Bruchési of Montréal, played a fundamental role in her vocation.

A strong missionary spirit enflamed the Church in the early twentieth century. But Canada was not considered among the great donor countries on a universal level, both for the Pontifical Mission Societies and for missionary vocations. Donations and resources passed through foreign religious

communities operating in Canada. Young people who aspired to missionary life had to be trained abroad. In 1902, after many trials, Délia and two companions founded an apostolic school in Montreal for the formation of young girls for missionary communities.

In November 1904, while Archbishop Bruchési was visiting Rome, Father Gustave Bourassa, a supporter of the young community, died in an accident. He had asked Bruchési to speak to the Pope about this nascent community and, despite his hesitations, the archbishop did so with Pope Pius X. The Pope exclaimed, "Establish it, establish it ... and all the blessings of heaven will descend upon this foundation." On December 7, the Pope conferred on it the name of the Society of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, indicating the whole world as its field of apostolate. On August 8, 1905, Délia made her perpetual profession. "All mission countries are open to you." She could only give thanks. Her missionary dream had become reality.

The founder realized that it was time for the Church in Canada to offer its contribution for service to the universal mission of the Church. She endeavored to awaken and form the missionary conscience in the country, creating fertile ground in which missionary vocations would emerge and where the resources needed to support missions in other countries would be found. The first request came from the bishop of Canton, China. In 1909 Délia sent him six young sisters. She would, in time, open a total of nineteen missions in the Far East. Among the requests she received from bishops, Délia Tétreault favored the works of mercy: kindergartens and orphanages for abandoned children, communities for leprous women, and houses for the elderly or disabled people. In fact, she opened the first school for girls in Canton, a hospital for people with psychic disorders, and promoted formation activities for the catechists and the other religious in the area. The obstacles were numerous as evidenced by her voluminous correspondence, yet undaunted she encouraged her daughters from a distance, insisting on Christian values.

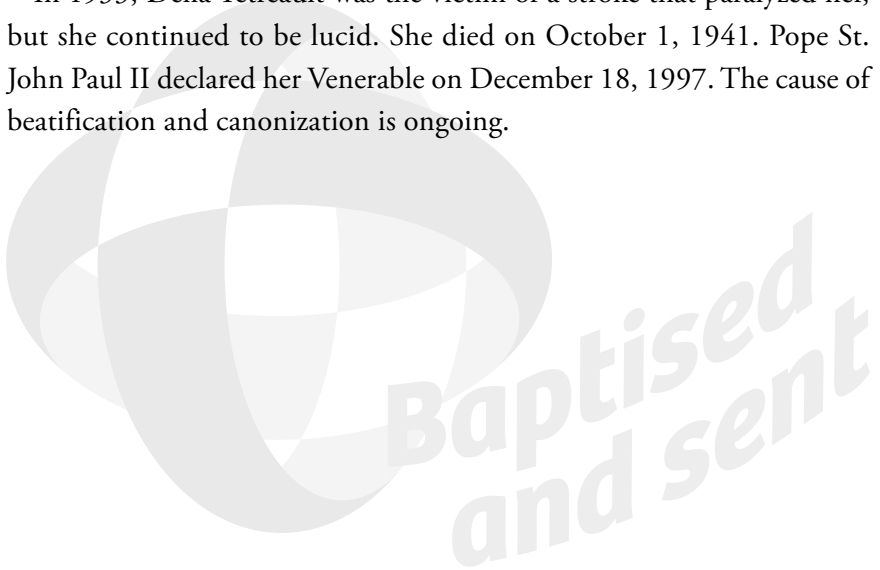
Because her health was fragile, Délia could never leave her homeland. But by God's providence, Canada benefited from her apostolic zeal for the mission. Among the preferred missionary works, she and her institute immediately became committed to promoting the Missionary Societies of the Holy Childhood and of the Propagation of the Faith. Both Societies were already present in Canada but were languishing because of neglect. In 1908, Délia and her daughters introduced the Society of the Holy Childhood to Outremont and Montréal. In 1917, Archbishop Paul Bruchési officially called them to revitalize the Society of the Holy Childhood in his diocese. They did everything in their power to inspire the local children to open their hearts to the needs of the other children in distant countries of the world who did not know Jesus. The sisters would visit all of the parishes and schools of Québec and elsewhere in Canada with boundless zeal.

In 1917, the Society of the Propagation of the Faith was experiencing a steady decline in support, and Délia was determined to address this problem with the same exuberance. During all of these years, the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception actively collaborated in the Pontifical Mission Societies at all levels, in Canada, South America, Haiti, and Madagascar. Délia Tétreault even exploited the power of the media to promote missionary formation in Canada and to support the missions abroad. In 1920 she launched the missionary magazine *Le Précurseur*, and an English edition was introduced in 1923. Many missionary vocations were born through exposure to these publications.

Seeking to fulfill the will of God, Délia persevered in trying to accomplish the second part of her dream: to collaborate in the foundation of a seminary for missionary priests and had a concrete plan to support this work. Discreetly, but boldly, she visited the bishops of the various dioceses, insisting that this initiative was not just a Canadian extension of the Paris Foreign Missions Seminary. As a result, on February 2, 1921, the bishops of Québec founded the Society of Foreign Missions of Québec.

From the very beginning, Délia invited the collaboration of the laity in support of the missions. She made them missionaries in their own areas of daily life. She introduced spiritual retreats for women and apostolic schools. She also answered an obvious need: to help the Chinese immigrants in the country. She opened hospitals, schools, and centers and inaugurated catechesis in Chinese. Her very compassion evangelized.

In 1933, Délia Tétreault was the victim of a stroke that paralyzed her, but she continued to be lucid. She died on October 1, 1941. Pope St. John Paul II declared her Venerable on December 18, 1997. The cause of beatification and canonization is ongoing.



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