

On April 14, Pope Francis signed a decree acknowledging the “heroic virtues” of three men and five women previously recognized as “Servants of God.”

St. Augustine coined the phrase “heroic virtue” to characterize the disposition of early Christian martyrs to a standard of bravery and goodness that elevated them above others. Later, the Church attached this description to other highly virtuous persons who do extraordinary good works.

When the Congregation for the Causes of Saints recommends to the Pope a decree of heroic virtue, this means that a Servant of God lived a life of profound union with God and fidelity to Church teaching. Close study also reveals that the person’s life manifested the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity to a preeminent degree.

By recognizing the heroic virtues of these Christians, the Pope also said that we may now call them “venerable,” that is, candidates for sainthood in the Catholic Church.

One of these was Mère Élisabeth Bruyère (1818–1876), who instituted the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa. The joy among the Grey Nuns (as they are also known) was palpable. Congregational Leader Sister Rachelle Watier described the worldwide repercussions of this news:

“Today is not only a great day filled with emotion and pride for the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa, it is also a day filled with joy for the whole Church, which has just recognized our foundress, Élisabeth Bruyère, Venerable, a first step toward her canonization...

“The sanctity of her virtues has been officially recognized. We are very happy to share our immense joy with the public. This is also a great day for the city of Ottawa, for Canada, for the 185 locations where the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa have been active in our country.”

Sister Watier noted that the love of God and a burning desire to help the vulnerable and those without a voice motivated Élisabeth Bruyère. In 1845, at age 27, she transformed the village of Bytown. Within months of her arrival, she had established a network of desperately needed social services: a hospital, an orphanage, a shelter for the elderly, and a school.

Truly, Élisabeth Bruyère was a woman ahead of her time. She initiated social changes that benefitted not only Ottawa, but the whole world. Today, members of her Congregation are active in the United States, in Africa, Japan, Brazil, and Canada.

The Church has taken the first steps leading to Mère Bruyère's canonization. In 1978, the Sisters of Charity asked Archbishop Plourde to open an inquiry into Mère Bruyère's life and writings, including more than 1,600 letters written plus correspondence received. This inquiry ended in 1989 with her designation as a "Servant of God."

Recently, a panel of theologians and cardinals of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints evaluated her life and proposed she that be considered "venerable."

The next step toward sainthood is "beatification" (with the title "Blessed"), which allows a particular group or region (for example, in Ottawa or in other areas where the Sisters of Charity serve) to honour a person. To beatify a candidate, there must be evidence that the person is responsible for interceding with God for a posthumous miracle.

For the Congregation to consider a candidate for sainthood there must be proof of a second posthumous miracle. When they have established this, the person is canonized.

Many in Ottawa and elsewhere hope that the Church will declare Venerable Élisabeth Bruyère a saint and make her better known. As a

result, the world will benefit from more people emulating her compassion and imploring God's blessings through her intercession.

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