

## Sister Marie Gérin-Lajoie, SBC (1890–1971)

Marie Gérin-Lajoie was born in Montreal on June 9, 1890. Her father was a lawyer and her mother, Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie, a pioneering crusader for women's rights in Québec. Marie did all her schooling at the Congrégation Notre-Dame of Montreal, where she obtained her Bachelor of Arts in 1911 from the Université Laval. She was the first Quebec woman to earn this degree. She begins her involvement in social action by working for the Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste, founded by her mother, as a writer and editor of their newsletter *La Bonne Parole*; she also gives conferences and sets up study circles.

In a society that becomes more and more industrialized, Marie is aware of the problems the working class undergoes: labor exploitation, poverty, violation of human dignity. Concerned about justice and peace, she wishes to take action against the causes of social inequalities so as to eliminate them. In 1918 she therefore decides to pursue an education in Social Service at Columbia University in New York. When she returns she teaches a preparation course for social action and organizes the social service at the Sainte-Justine Hospital.

To provide a solid basis for her social commitment, in 1923 she founds the Institut Notre-Dame du Bon-Conseil of Montreal that supports different forms of social action. She opens several Social Centers, Centers for Popular Education and Social Services, that work towards promoting the rights of women and families of the working class and towards improving their living conditions. Also family and social education is essential to the mission of the new community. In 1931, Marie Gérin-Lajoie opens a School of Social Action and in 1939 the School of Social Services that, the following year, is integrated to the Université de Montréal.

A woman of faith and of action, Marie Gérin-Lajoie finds her strength and dynamism in Ignatian Spirituality, that combines contemplation and action. A pioneer of social service in the French Canadian community in Québec, she witnessed to her contemporaries the sense of a social commitment inspired by the Gospel. She died on January 7, 1971, at the age of 80.

