

IT ONLY TAKES A SPARK...



Lorette Noble
National Past President

And what a spark she was, Mary Ellen “Bellelle” Guerin, the foundress of the national organization of The Catholic Women’s League of Canada!

Interest in Bellelle Guerin has recently been re-kindled when a special award and a beautiful pin were created in her name in 2008. Who was this woman of vision?

She was

- the first national president from 1920-23 and the first honorary life member
- responsible for creating the motto “For God and Canada”
- the first Canadian woman to receive the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice medal, bestowed on her by Pope Pius XI in 1922

Bellelle was the oldest child and only daughter of Thomas Guerin of the Glen of Aherlow and Mary Ellen Maguire of Cavan, both from Ireland. She was born in Montreal on September 24, 1849 and educated by the nuns of the Congregation of Notre Dame. She had three younger brothers, James, Edmund and John. In 1910, Bellelle’s brother, Dr. James Guerin, was the first son of an Irish man to be elected mayor of Montreal. He was also a widower and father of two children, so Bellelle helped raise the children and also acted as “lady mayoress” during his term of office, when she no doubt developed and enhanced her organizational skills.

She was apparently an eloquent speaker and a poet of distinction. Some of her writings remain among the family papers at the McCord Museum in Montreal and are fine examples of the style of her times.

The year 1910 was significant in Bellelle’s life as well as in the unfolding story of the League as the 1st International Eucharistic Congress was held in Montreal. Bellelle was presented with a beautiful sterling silver bowl in recognition and appreciation for her effort in helping to organize the Congress (see *The Canadian League* fall 2007 issue). Archbishop Francis Bourne, of Westminster, England, attended the Congress and brought news of the work of the Catholic Women’s League, formed in England in 1906 to promote religious and intellectual interests of Catholic women and to work for the poor and needy in Britain. He planted the seed for and encouraged the creation of a similar national organization here in Canada. The first local Catholic Women’s League was organized in Edmonton in November 1912 by Katherine Hughes. Similar Catholic women’s groups



began to be formed in Montreal (1917), Toronto and Ottawa (1918), and Halifax, Regina and Sherbrooke (1919), all of them working to provide support for immigrant women and girls, helping them to settle into their new lives in Canada.

When word came to Bellelle via Katherine Hughes’ sister, Loretta Kneil, who was working in the Women’s Division of the Canadian Department of Immigration and Colonization, of the need for a national Catholic women’s organization, Bellelle decided to set things in motion. The Montreal Club became the Montreal City Sub-division in 1920, with Bellelle as its first president. On March 19, 1920 it sent out a letter to everywhere a League had been established, inviting them to a conference to be held in Montreal on June 17, 1920.

Catholic women from seven of the nine provinces attended and decided to form a national Catholic Women’s League, electing Bellelle Guerin, who was 71 years young, as the first national president. Women from six provinces were also elected as officers of the first national executive. The agenda items included adoption of a constitution; incorporation; finance and headquarters; *The Canadian League* magazine (the first issue was published in May 1921); organizing further branches; immigration; immodesty in dress, pictures and films; and divorce. They even sent the first resolution to the federal government asking for stricter laws on divorce!

Bellelle Guerin was a woman of grandiose vision and a role model *par excellence*. She was the spark that lit the flame which united Catholic women across Canada, as this extract from her eloquent address to the first national convention in Toronto 1921 demonstrates:

“Oh! Catholic women of Canada, let us stand close together - so close - so close that we will hear each other’s heartbeats. . . . Shoulder to shoulder, heart to heart, let us go forth from this Convention bound by a solidarity that nothing can break, gentlewomen, but brave soldiers holding aloft our banner of patriotism to our beloved country and of inviolable fidelity to our Glorious Faith!”

This torch has been passed down through many generations and as we approach the celebration of the League’s 90th anniversary, we can be proud of those who have gone before us and left us such a proud legacy. We are *Women of Peace and Hope* and, above all, women of action. †