

The Life of Sr. Marguerite De Clerck, SNDdeN, a missionary doctor in the Congo, the “Mother Teresa of Diabetics”

A commitment to “*quality healthcare with compassion,*” with respect for human dignity.

Marie-Sophie Tournay, Province Secretary of the BSF, February 2026



© Private Collection Sr. Marguerite De Clerck 50th Anniversary of Religious Life

Some important dates

The stay of Sr. Marguerite de la Trinité—a Sister of Notre-Dame de Namur, within the historic Namur community during this typically Belgian grey and rainy winter, allowed me to speak with her on numerous occasions. My admiration for this daughter of Saint Julie Billiart, who became a Sister of Notre-Dame de Namur, and the work of her life, have prompted me to put pen to paper on the eve of her 100th birthday. It seemed important for me to sketch a portrait of the woman more commonly known as Dr. De Clerck in the Congo, or M. De Clerck when she writes a book or a report. I have drawn upon numerous writings and audio interviews in which she recounts many moments of her life in the Congo, and her entire body of work in the fight against diabetes. But my intention is also to write beyond this well-documented life, and to try to uncover the foundations of her commitment in her religious faith and in her love for Mother Julie’s charity.

Born on September 7, 1927, in Bruges, Belgium, Sr. Marguerite and her three younger sisters grew up in a joyful and loving family, and she completed her entire schooling at a school run by the Sisters of Notre-Dame. Bilingual from a very young age, she had no trouble learning the local languages spoken in the Congo, such as Kikongo and Lingala.

She felt the call to religious life and humanitarian service at a very early age. On October 1, 1947, at the age of 20, she entered the novitiate of the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre-Dame de Namur in Jumet. She earned first her diploma as a midwife in 1954, then resumed her studies in tropical medicine in 1966, eventually becoming a doctor in 1973.

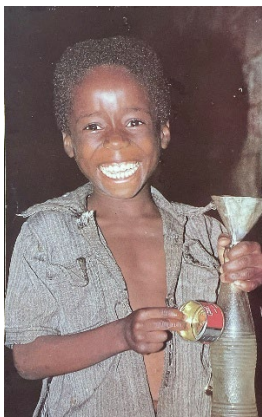
Sr. Marguerite embodies the deep commitment and boundless generosity that have marked the history of missionary medicine in Central Africa. She devoted 80 years to serving the people of the Congo, where her work has left an indelible mark, especially among those with diabetes.

The Call to Mission in Africa



With her diploma as a midwife in hand, she chose to answer the call to mission work after making her perpetual vows, and in 1955, she left for the Belgian Congo in Africa, where she began working in Lemfu, and especially in Kitenda in the province of Bandundu—now the province of Kwango in Lower Congo. At that time, access to healthcare remained a major challenge, especially in rural and isolated areas. Doctors did not treat pregnant women or other patients, and midwives were on the front lines caring for all kinds of patients.

© General Archives
May 1955, Sr. Marguerite flies to the Congo



© Private Collection of Sr. Marguerite De Clerck
Sr. Marguerite's favorite photo, representing the face of her Africa: poor but always smiling.

The Independence of the Belgian Congo

Sr. Marguerite had been in the Congo for five years when independence was proclaimed on June 30, 1960. Despite more dangerous times, such as during the violent Mulele rebellion in 1964, she did not consider returning to Belgium because, as she said during an interview on Radio Okapi in 2015, “... in any vocation, there are difficulties, and one cannot simply give up at the first sign of trouble.” It was during this period, amid a climate of Zaireanization and radicalization, that Sr. Marguerite decided she would henceforth be known as Dr. De Clerck and would sign her books as M. De Clerck. Indeed, the new regime mandated the use of surnames and the removal of all Christian references. Health problems forced her to return to Belgium in 1966, and she then decided to pursue her studies in medicine.



© LebeauZaire Facebook Page
Mama Yemo Hospital in 1973

When she returned to the Congo in 1974, she was appointed as a doctor for the Congolese government and began working at the General Hospital of Kinshasa, then known as Mama Yemo. At that time, all doctors worked under the auspices of the WHO, and there were no Congolese doctors yet.

There, Sr. Marguerite distinguished herself through her dedication to the most vulnerable: women, children, the sick, and marginalized people. In addition to providing essential medical care, she developed prevention campaigns, trained local staff, and encouraged community self-reliance. Her holistic approach to health—combining medical expertise, active listening, and respect for local cultures—helped build bonds of trust and hope. The doctors then decided that Dr. De Clerck was the most qualified to care for patients with diabetes because she understood their dietary habits and daily concerns and spoke well enough their languages.

The Fight Against Diabetes and Education

Sr. Marguerite then established a care program for people with diabetes within the hospital. She began subsequently to visit centers outside the hospital, stationing a nurse at each one to follow her own methods of work and care. When Sr. Marguerite decided to focus on education rather than care, she founded a non-profit organization, the “Diabetes and Health Education Center,” in 2000. There, she established a program for diabetes management, training local doctors and nurses, educating people with diabetes themselves, and prevention. For this to work, treatments and education had to be adapted to local conditions, in a context of extreme poverty and difficult geographical accessibility.



© Private collection of Sr. Marguerite De Clerck
Dr. De Clerck sees a young diabetic patient

Sr. Marguerite would face numerous challenges over the years: lack of resources, pandemics, political instability, and the need to innovate in order to provide care under sometimes precarious conditions. To ensure quality care, she read the global literature, visited experienced

centers, and reached out to other doctors. She therefore had to travel extensively, especially in Africa, to gather others' experiences and make them available to her Congolese colleagues and patients. Despite the complexity and scope of the task, she remains faithful to her mission, guided by a deep conviction that every life saved and every smile restored justifies all the sacrifices.

What about the activities of the non-profit organization today?

The Diabetes and Health Education Center has developed a strategy focused on therapeutic education as an essential component of diabetes care. Its work aims to educate patients, their families, and healthcare professionals to improve understanding of the disease, the quality of care, and, above all, quality of life. Continuing education programs are organized for doctors and nurses to promote **practices tailored to the local context**. The center also produces a wide range of accessible educational materials—**books, manuals, illustrations, and comic books**—designed to make medical knowledge **understandable to everyone**. Patient education aims to strengthen their autonomy in the daily management of the disease, particularly regarding monitoring, diet, and treatment adherence. Finally, awareness campaigns, screening activities, and the **training of peer educators** help promote prevention within the community and reduce diabetes-related complications. About 50 centers operate independently. They have integrated diabetes care units into their operations and follow the principles established by the nonprofit organization through Dr. De Clerck; on average, 70 healthcare providers—doctors and nurses—are trained at the centers each year. To date, these centers register approximately 50,000 cases annually.



© Bijou Lomboto's private collection
Seated on the left is Dr. Jean-Claude Dimbelolo, the longest-serving staff member since the 1990s. Standing, wearing glasses, is Bijou Lomboto, who has been working with Sr. Marguerite since 2005 on book publishing and center management.

International Recognition

Dr. Marguerite De Clerck enjoys international professional recognition. In 2014, she received an award from the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) in Brazzaville for her work combating diabetes in Africa. She is also a Knight of the Order of Leopold and an Officer of the Order of Leopold in Belgium.



© Property of Sr. Marguerite De Clerck
Medal awarded upon her appointment as Knight of the Order of Leopold

Although she has been suffering from macular degeneration that has severely impaired her vision for the past decade, Sr. Marguerite has chosen to remain in the Congo because she wishes to ensure the continuity of her work as much as possible, by continuing to advise her team of doctors and caregivers. When she is in Belgium, she fills her suitcases with medicines and bandages and mobilizes her network of donors to fund the health centers as well as her non-profit organization, the Center for Education, Diabetes, and Health.

Mother Julie, Mother Teresa, and Sister Marguerite De Clerck of the Congo

What connects these devoted women, even though they did not necessarily share the same goals or the same living and working environments? Mother Julie was the founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre-Dame de Namur, and Mother Teresa founded the Missionaries of Charity. As for Sr. Marguerite, SNDdeN, her nonprofit organization “Center for Diabetes and Health Education” operates solely through laypeople and volunteers. But what they have in common is indeed their dedication and charism. A clear and radical charism, driven by the desire to make known and proclaim God’s goodness, as Mother Julie intended, in service to the poorest, those in need of education or care.



© Google Images

A Shared Compass

Julie Billiart dedicated her life to poor children with no future by providing them with an education. Mother Teresa cared for the dying and the utterly marginalized in the slums of Calcutta. For Sr. Marguerite in the Congo, she turned her attention to people with diabetes who lacked access to care, treating and educating them. **Their guiding principle was the same: to go where human dignity is most threatened.**



© Google Images

The same faith translated into concrete actions

None of the three ??? (what three?—not clear) was content with mere inner piety. On the contrary, they paid radical attention to the most forgotten: Mother Julie sought to educate girls in the post-French Revolution era, a time of great educational and spiritual poverty. Mother Teresa accompanied those whom no one wanted to see. And Sr. Marguerite cared for and accompanied generations of isolated Congolese people with diabetes. **All three demonstrated a faith that is embodied: learning, nourishing, caring, touching.**



© Private collection of M.S. Tournay

The same tenacity, perseverance, and great inner freedom

Mother Julie founded the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre-Dame de Namur despite illness, exile, and misunderstanding, all against a backdrop of political tension. In India, Mother Teresa left the comfort of teaching for the streets; she persevered despite extreme poverty and criticism. Sr. Marguerite, nicknamed “**the Mother Teresa of diabetics**” but also known as “**the Iron Lady**,” has for nearly 80 years successfully combined religious life with grassroots medicine in Congo, through consistency, patience, and the humble repetition of care—all this despite a challenging political climate and relatively difficult working conditions—by prioritizing a social approach to medicine.

A discreet yet fruitful holiness

Despite her fame, Mother Teresa lived a life of great simplicity. **As for Mother Julie and Sr. Marguerite, their lives reflect a holiness that makes no noise but profoundly transforms those who have crossed paths with them.** All three embody the complementary facets of the same love: for Mother Julie, making the future possible through education; for Mother Teresa, making death humane through compassion; and for Sr. Marguerite, making life liveable through faithful care and as joyful as possible despite diabetes.

In 2025, Sr. Marguerite confided to Marie Felten, the Congregation's General Archivist: "Spreading the good news, just like Mother Julie did ... Perhaps I received a tiny bit of her guidance, because I learned to teach... Mother Julie reached out to the poorest, and that is what I do..."

Today, Sr. Marguerite De Clerck's legacy continues to inspire generations of doctors and religious Sisters working in the Congo and elsewhere in Africa. **Her life's journey bears witness to the power of human and spiritual commitment in the service of others, reminding everyone that hope and solidarity know no borders.** At nearly 100 years old and with 80 years of religious life, entirely devoted to the mission, **her only wish is that "all of this continues without her."**

Just like Mother Julie, with her trust in God, Sr. Marguerite De Clerck prioritized the education of the poorest. **Educating to liberate, so that all may know how much the good Lord loves them.**

Conclusion

There are lives that make no noise and yet manage to span a century. Sister Marguerite's belongs to this lineage. Arriving in the Congo as a young woman, she remained there despite the upheavals of history; she chose constancy in presence and action. As a doctor, she treated visible wounds; as a Religious Sister, she touched more hidden wounds. Her mission, beyond the number of patients treated and medical staff trained, can be summed up as 80 years of unwavering devotion. Following in the footsteps of Saint Julie Billiart and the charism of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, she manifests God's goodness through humble and persevering closeness, which fits perfectly with **the mission of the SNDdeN:**

"The Sisters of Notre-Dame de Namur, women with hearts as vast as the world, make known the Goodness and Love of God, with and among people living in poverty, through a life according to the Gospel, community, and prayer. Continuing a strong tradition of education, we stand with the poor, especially women and children, in the most neglected places. Each of us commits our one and only life to working with others to create justice and peace for all."



© Private collection of M-S Tournay
Sr. Marguerite in the chapel in Namur, next to Mother Julie and the statue of the Virgin Mary—a replica of the one at Notre-Dame de Paris, which is her favorite. February 2026

How to Contribute

If you wish to support and sustain the work of Sr. Marguerite De Clerck, SNDdeN, a missionary doctor in Congo, a donation—large or small—can always be made to the Belgian bank account she uses to cover the expenses of her non-profit organization in Congo.

Here are the bank details:

BELFIUS Bank, 5000 Namur, Belgium

SWIFT CODE: GKCCBEBB

IBAN: BE55 0638 2387 0444

BENEFICIARY: MARGUERITE DE CLERCK

A few words from Mother Julie, a source of inspiration for Sister Marguerite

Be assured that if any of you needs anything, I will go begging for you from door to door; I will go everywhere until I find what can bring relief.

Julie Billiard, Retreat Talk

We are here only for the poor, for the poor, absolutely only for the poor

Julie, Letter 86

Our health does not belong to us; the good Lord gives it to us. Let us care for it as a trust entrusted to us.

Julie Billiard, Letter 262

Farewell, my dear friend; **above all, take good care of your health** for the greater glory of God. Take some wine when you need it; if twice is not enough, take it three times—the good Lord will give it to us, if it pleases Him."

Letter from Julie No. 350 to Sister Jeanne (Zele), July 26, 1814



© General Archives.

Sr. Marguerite is preparing to leave for the Belgian Congo for the first time in 1955

Take good care of your health, my dear daughters, but without delicacy or fuss. Go about your business briskly; that is the spirit of our holy Institute. No laziness, but **reasonable care for your poor, wretched "brother donkey"**—that is how **St. Francis of Assisi referred to his body**. He is not always content with everything, that poor wretch. Let us try to be patient with him; let us promise him something better. After the general resurrection on the last day, he will be quite glad not to have had all his comforts. But let us grant him what is necessary; let us not put him in a position to complain so much about our mistreatment. Let us proceed gently, for this wretched human nature can only be accustomed to bearing the yoke very gently."

Letter 238, Mother Julie (Namur) to Sister Caroline (Ambleville), January 15, 1813.

Acknowledgments

A special thank you to Sister Marguerite De Clerck, who kindly answered all my questions during her last visit to Namur in the winter of 2025–2026 and who opened the doors to her personal archives for me; to my colleague, Marie Felten, general archivist, for her proofreading and her wise and kind advice, as well as to Sr. Anne Stevenson, who knows Sr. Marguerite well and has written about her activities on several occasions.

Letter 86

Sources consulted:

1. Association of Medical Alumni of the Catholic University of Louvain, Article #24: The Integration of Diabetes Care into Primary Health Care.
2. Activity bulletins of the non-profit organization Centre d'Éducation Diabète et Santé
3. Interview with the magazine Grand Témoin on Radio Okapi in Kinshasa, October 2015
4. Interview with Marie Felten in May 2025, General Archives Office of the Congregation, Namur.
5. Excerpts from Sister Julie Billiard's letters regarding the sisters' health, General Archives Office of the Congregation, Namur
6. Report by the non-profit organization Centre d'Éducation Diabète et Santé on diabetes worldwide and in Kinshasa between 1974 and 2000
7. Report by the non-profit organization Centre d'Éducation Diabète et Santé, published in 2025
8. Website of the SNDdeN of Congo-Kinshasa

