

*The following excerpts have been prepared for use during a CSSJ Heritage Pilgrimage – October, 2006. For the complete text and footnotes see the outstanding work of Mary McGlone, CS/Carondelet, on the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph.*

## Le Puy

### FROM CHAPTER 1: THE BEGINNINGS IN FRANCE

No one is born of her own power or volition. We all enter the world as the fruit of a history of human relations and the long course of ongoing creation. Not only do we evolve from the life of our ancestors, but from the very beginning, we are conditioned by the environment in which we live. Our culture and especially our mother tongue teach us how to understand the world and our place in it. Our biography is simply the history of our relationships with the people, the culture and the world that surrounds us. At one and the same moment, we are created by and creators of history. This is our collaboration in ongoing creation.

The biography, the history, of the Sisters of St. Joseph is also the story of relationships. We have our roots in a specific culture at one particular moment of history. Born in seventeenth century France, the life of the Congregation was interwoven with the Spirit's movement in the Tridentine Reformation and its French expressions. Through the course of three and a half centuries, under the inspiration of the Spirit, the Sisters of St. Joseph have grown in relationship with their historical and religious context. In order to understand who we are today, we need to explore the road that led us to this moment.

#### THE LITTLE DESIGN



The foundation of the Sisters of St. Joseph evolved through Father Médaille's missions and pastoral work with women. No documentation exists to outline the precise origins of the congregation. What do exist are various documents that hint at Médaille's activities with different groups of women between 1646 and 1651. The documents that Father Médaille wrote include *Règlements* (a rule) and the *Eucharistic Letter*, written for the first groupings of women and the *Constitutions* written for the congregation founded in 1650. Other documentary sources referring to his activities come from the archives of the Jesuits.

In 1646, Father Médaille took the initiative to communicate directly with Father Vincent Caraffa, the Jesuit Superior General. Although his letter has not been found, a letter Caraffa wrote to Médaille's superior, the rector at Saint-Flour, refers to what Médaille had written him:

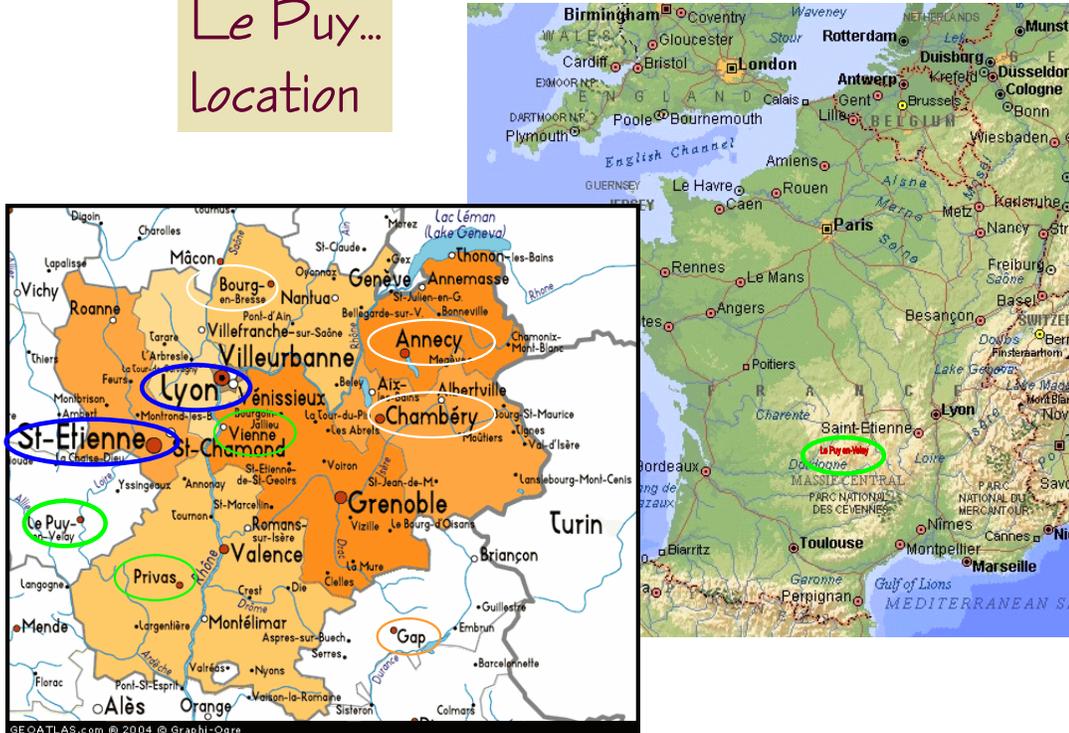
*As regards the grouping of pious women which he reports he has founded, I can only reply that it should not have been begun without the approval of the Provincial. Much less should rules have been prescribed for them unless he approved. Both could lead to idle talk, perhaps even dangers. And so you are to take care that I am informed more fully through the Provincial, so that if this is for the glory of God, it may be carried on with all the more effectiveness as it is seen to be well-grounded. I want to know the nature of his plan and from whom he obtained permission to busy himself with such matters which are hardly in accordance with our Institute...*

Because Médaille's original letter has not been found, the only thing we know for certain is that Médaille went beyond the activities prescribed for the Jesuits on mission by founding a group of women. While they could have thought of themselves as like a sodality, it seems that they were more than that. According to Father Nepper, we have in this correspondence the first partial evidence of the existence of the *Little Design*, or one of the first foundations leading to the Sisters of St. Joseph.<sup>43</sup> Others think that the letter simply refers to women's groups founded by Father Médaille, and that the first foundation leading to the

Congregation of St. Joseph began at Dunières in 1649. Whichever of those opinions be true, it is clear that Médaille was willing to risk supporting the growth of groups of women who wanted more than others made available to them.

In the end, in spite of all that remains unknown, it is possible to conclude that the women who took part in the *Little Design* created a new model of consecrated life and thus opened the way for the foundation of the Sisters of St. Joseph. They accepted a rule that structured a religious life, all the while assuring the necessary freedom to respond fully to their apostolic calling. Secrecy helped them protect the tender novelty of their project as well as to nurture a spirituality characterized by the self-emptying ideal that typified their epoch.

Le Puy...  
Location



### FROM THE LITTLE DESIGN TO THE CONGREGATION IN LE PUY

The first house of the Sisters of St. Joseph about which we have certifiable documentation is that established in Dunières in 1649. According to the official records, on the 29th of September 1649, Sister Anna Deschaux was the first to take the habit and also the first superior of a group established at the request of Reverend Father Médaille of the Company of Jesus. The documents continue saying that Sister Anna was followed by many others, including Sisters Catherine Gagnaire and Marie Blanc. It seems that these sisters formed a parish community, with the purpose of working for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the neighbor in the parish. Unfortunately, we know little more about them. Nevertheless, recalling that the communities described in Médaille's *Règlements* were formed by groups of three, it would seem reasonable that in this community we see one more step in the evolution toward Church recognition of women's apostolic life.

The community of Le Puy, recognized by the Sisters of St. Joseph as their official foundation, was also the product of a process of evolution. The best evidence that we have about that community comes from the preface to the *Constitutions* of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Vienne, published in 1694. The history recounted in that preface says that on the 15th of October, 1650, when everything was prepared for the realization of the *Little Design*, His Excellency, Henri de Maupas, called together all of the Daughters of the Hospital for Orphans and he delivered an exhortation, filled with the unction of the Spirit of God by which he encouraged all of them to the great Love of God and the most perfect Charity for the neighbor; at the end he gave his blessing, with extraordinary testimonies, speaking paternally

and cordially about the Congregation. He put them directly under the protection of Saint Joseph, and ordered that their Congregation should be called the Congregation of the Sisters or the Daughters of Saint Joseph; he gave the Rule for their conduct and stipulated a form of habit; at the end, he confirmed the establishment of the Congregation and the Rules that he gave by his *Lettres Patentes*, given on March 10, 1651.

We know the names of the first sisters of Le Puy only because on December 13, 1651, they signed a contract of association, legalizing the vows that they took that day. The newly vowed sisters were:

Françoise Eyraud, 39 years old, from Saint-Privat in the diocese of Le Puy  
Claudia Chastel, a widow since 1647, from Langogne, in the diocese of Mende  
Marguerite Burdier, 26 years old, from Saint-Julien, in the diocese of Vienne  
Anna Chaleyser, 46 years old, from Saint-Finey-Malafau, in the diocese of Lyon  
Anna Vey de Saint-Jeure, 15 years old, from the diocese of Le Puy  
Anna Brun, 15 years old, from Saint-Victor, in the diocese of Le Puy.

The ages listed for the sisters are approximations, based on baptismal or death certificates. Given the age of the last two, it is quite possible that they had been children in the orphanage who wanted to join in community with the women who had cared for them.

It is obvious that this foundation had gone through a process of preparation, but the question of how is not quite so clear. The history behind the scenes would probably reveal that Françoise Eyraud and others among the six, perhaps with Father Médaille's collaboration, had obtained positions in the Hospital for Orphans and Widows called Montferrand in Le Puy. The hospital archives show that Françoise Eyraud had been the director of the hospital since 1646. Those same archives indicate that in the hospital, Françoise was in charge of thirty-nine orphans and two servants. Reading between the lines, one sees here another community of three sisters. Nevertheless, the size of the community was not rigidly established; in fact, another report indicates that a few days later a fourth woman named Marguerite arrived to join the group.



What is certain is that Bishop Henri de Maupas of Le Puy had the authority to decide who would be put in charge of the hospital. Because the women who arrived to take charge were part of a group formed by Father Médaille, it appears probable that the bishop and the Jesuit had made a plan together and that sometime before 1650, the bishop allowed the women to begin to experiment with their new life style in the public atmosphere of the local hospital.

If all of this is true, the evolution of the project begun by Father Médaille and groups of women begins to become clear. He began supporting the communities as early as 1646, if not earlier. One of those communities established itself in the orphans' hospital at Montferrand while another had begun in the parish at Dunières early enough to formalize its structure in 1649. From what is known about the hospital community between 1646 and 1650, there was a period of experimentation in apostolic and communal life before they formalized their association. In the end, Bishop de Maupas gave his approval to the sisters in the hospital in October of 1650. They received his *Lettres Patentes* on March 31, 1651 and after more than a year of formation, they made vows on December 13, 1651.

The *Lettres Patentes*, Bishop de Maupas' legal document, makes it clear that the bishop expected the group to grow. When de Maupas wrote this document, the congregation had six members who had not yet pronounced vows. Obviously, he believed there could be more in the future. His openness to their expansion provided the space for growth he never would have imagined.

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#### TOWARD THE FUTURE

In the beginning, Bishop de Maupas acted as the father protector of the community. After two years, when he was no longer able to do so, he appointed his vicar, the Sulpician Monseñor de Lantages to take over that responsibility. It seems that Lantages was a specialist in formation because he was also the protector of the Sisters of The Visitation in Le Puy and the founder of the seminary. Without a doubt, he too had great influence in the early days of the new congregation.

As we noted in the list of Father Médaille's assignments, he was never missioned to Le Puy. Because of this, it is obvious that he could not be involved in the daily life of the sisters. While Father Médaille fulfilled his responsibilities in Aurillac, he also wrote *Constitutions* and *avis* (counsels) for some of his communities. But even so, he was not in charge of his *Little Design*. What is sure is that the moment had come for Jean Pierre Médaille to live the maxim he had written down for others: *Advance good works until near completion; and then, whenever possible, let them be completed by someone else who will receive the honor.*

When Father Médaille died in 1669, there were more than thirty communities of Saint Joseph in the dioceses of Le Puy, Lyon, Clermont, Vienne, Viviers, and Mende. Each community was independent, with new communities being formed by sisters from an established community who received the request to extend the movement to a new place. In this way the Congregation grew, extending itself throughout the region of the original foundation in Le Puy, and then later Lyon.



The proliferation of communities of Saint Joseph, together with their characteristic openness to diversity, left ample space for differing opinions about the structure of their life. Even before the end of the seventeenth century, there were opposing tendencies and concepts regarding the purpose of the Congregation. Put in its simplest form, there were some sisters who wanted to emphasize and reinforce the structures of the Congregation similar to a religious order while others wanted the Congregation to develop and adapt its structures in response to the needs to which they were called to respond.

The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph began as an experiment. Without stating it clearly, the Congregation took its place in the long procession of

Christian women who, since the time of the Primitive Church, attempted to develop and practice their apostolic vocation in all its fullness.

But, like Francis de Sales at the beginning of their century, they were doing something countercultural. Because of that, it should not seem strange that some of their own sisters would be attracted to more traditional movements in the history of the Church. That tension did not end with the seventeenth century.

## LYON, MONISTROL, BAS-EN-BASSET, SAINT-DIDER FROM CHAPTER 2: MOTHER ST. JOHN FONTBONNE AND THE REBIRTH OF THE CONGREGATION

Jeanne Fontbonne was born on March 31, 1759, in the town of Bas in Alta Loire. According to her biographers, Jeanne showed the qualities of leadership from an early age. Moreover, according to accounts from her childhood, she gave early evidence of having a strong will and personal judgment. As one story goes, when her elder sister Marie was preparing for First Communion, the sister catechist strove to impress the child with the holiness of the sacrament and her own unworthiness. She was so successful that the child became scrupulous and afraid to approach the altar. It was her younger sister Jeanne who encouraged her, telling her to put more confidence in the goodness of God than in the opinion of the religious. The proof of the child's audacity came from the fact that the sister catechist was none other than the director of their school and their paternal aunt.



### 100 YEARS OF THE LITTLE DESIGN

Jeanne Fontbonne had two paternal aunts who were members of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the town of Bas: Sister Saint Francis and Sister of the Visitation. They were among the hundreds of French women who, captivated by Médaille's dream for the Little Design, had dedicated themselves to serving the neighbor in that part of France for more than 110 years.

Much of the history of the first century of the Sisters of St. Joseph is hidden in the shadows of the major events that took place in the period before the French Revolution. The story of unpretentious women who served the neighbor in simplicity did not appear important enough to enter into the historical annals of the nation or the Church. In spite of that, we do know that, following the inspiration of their foundation, there was a large variety of groupings of Sisters of St. Joseph in mid-eighteenth century France. Since the time of the original foundation at Le Puy, each community of Saint Joseph was independent, with a local superior and the bishop or his delegate as an ecclesiastical superior.

The strength of diversity is precisely its openness. The Sisters of St. Joseph did not define themselves in terms of a special apostolate or a particular style of life, but rather, they were organized to be able to respond to any need in any place. Because of that, over the course of the first one hundred years of their Congregational life, they could be found in cities, in towns and in rural areas. They ministered in parishes and cared for orphans; they sheltered abandoned women and opened schools; they administered hospitals, visited the jails, and taught manual arts to women and children in order to help them become financially independent. The reality is that no one knows how many ministries they carried out because they didn't publish their activities and many of the parish archives that could provide information about their labor disappeared during the Revolution.

Although there are no precise records, it is clear that from 1650 to 1789, the Congregation continued to grow and adapt to the needs of the people and places where it was established.

It is noteworthy that in the four articles that speak of the end of the Congregation, two of them refer to the formation of congregations or groups that the sisters should form and advise. This indicates the strong emphasis. This implies that the sisters were acting as spiritual directors for the people and groups they formed. Thus, no matter what might be her particular ministry, the mission of the Sister of St. Joseph was to form community and, in the process, to help others deepen their own spirituality.

According to the ideals to which they have committed themselves, and dependent on the grace of God, the Sisters of St. Joseph are faithful daughters of the Church careful to maintain an official tie to the hierarchy without allowing others to interfere in the interior life of the Congregation. They not only accept diversity, but also proclaim it a value. This value leads them to seek and appreciate the particular way in which the Holy Spirit moves in the life of each person. In addition, the value they put on diversity encourages them to respect different expressions of communal life and to adapt their style of life and their ministry to the particular needs of the people in whose midst they find themselves. For the sisters of this apostolic congregation, communal life is essential because it prepares them to engender community among all the people and groups with whom they are in contact. This is the Congregation in which Jeanne Fontbonne received the habit on December 17, 1778.

## MONISTROL

### Mother St. John Fontbonne



In 1778, Jeanne and Marie Fontbonne told their aunt, Mother Saint Francis, that they wanted to enter the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Bas. Instead of rejoicing, Mother St. Francis painted a harsh picture of religious life, suggesting that they did not possess the strength and virtue necessary to live it. In spite of her warnings, or perhaps in reaction to them, the two sisters only intensified their resolve. What they did not anticipate was that, just before the date of their entrance into the postulate, Bishop Galard, the bishop of Le Puy, would ask Mother St. Francis to go to Monistrol to establish a school and found a new

community in that city. In addition, he instructed her that it would be a good idea to have her two nieces go with her to found the new community. Thus, even before beginning religious life, the two sisters had to adjust their dreams and leave their hometown.

In July of 1778, when the founders of the new community arrived in Monistrol, the group included four relatives: the elder Fontbonne sisters, Mother Saint Francis and Sister of the Visitation, and their postulant nieces, Jeanne and Marie Fontbonne. The two young women received the habit on December 17 of that same year.

Seven years later, in 1785, with the Monistrol community well established, Mother St. Francis returned to her community in Bas. Bishop Galard made it known that he hoped that Sister Saint John would replace her aunt as superior. The sisters of the community elected Sister St. John superior of the

Monistrol community when she was 26 years of age. That was the beginning of what would be a very long experience of leadership.

### The Superior and the French Revolution

#### The First Chapter of the Revolution and the Sisters at Monistrol:



While the seeds of the Revolution were germinating, the Sisters of St. Joseph continued with their mission. In Monistrol, where their labor now included the administration of a hospital, Mother St. John wanted to extend the sisters ministry through establishing a workshop of sorts. Unfortunately, she lacked sufficient funds. She took her case to Bishop Galard and he put her in contact with Madame Chantemule, a noble lady of the region. Not only did she provide the funds for the workshop, but

also she became a close friend of Mother St. John and supported many of the community's projects.

The workshop they established had a creative purpose, very much in keeping with the mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph. It was founded to provide a place in which pious persons could meet to work together, whether on behalf of the poor, for their families, or for their own sustenance. The Religious would be present to offer them help in their work and, if necessary, to instruct them. Consideration of the description of the workshop makes it clear that Mother St. John had decided to gather women of different ages and classes under one roof. The workshop included women who had the resources to be able to work on behalf of the poor, other mothers who needed to work for their children and finally, young women who were apparently on their own. With all its diversity, this group was designed not simply to produce artisan goods, but also to bring together people who, because of their differences, would rarely come together as equals. Thus, while the nation was feeling the tensions of class and increasing poverty, the Sisters of St. Joseph in Monistrol were forming community among representatives of groups that would soon regard one another as bitter enemies.

It is impossible to know the opinions of the Sisters of St. Joseph regarding the political agitation of their day. It is likely that because of their contacts with people of the upper class and the clergy, some of the sisters knew about the new philosophies that were becoming the rage. In conversations and even homilies, they could have heard criticism of the Enlightenment ideas that promoted the individualism and lack of respect for authority that helped form the intellectual basis of the Revolution. According to some critics, the

philosophers had reached the conclusion that it was impossible to recognize any authority beyond that of individual reason.

With all of its new expressions, this philosophy still had much in common with the individualism fomented by the Protestant Reformation and its questioning of authority, faith in personal interpretation and emphasis on individual salvation. Because of that, to people not caught up in it, the new philosophy could well have appeared to be nothing more than an old wolf in a new sheepskin.

Even if the sisters were not in touch with the intellectual currents of the day, their encounters with the needy kept them aware of the suffering of the poor. They knew that the people could not withstand the burden of their excessive taxation. They also knew that rampant corruption benefited many civil and even Church leaders while class divisions escalated in a system that continually increased the misery of the poor. No matter what the level of their intellectual and political awareness, the sisters would have had daily contact with people who needed their material help.

The French Revolution affected the sisters in the places where they lived, prayed, and worked. It attacked their moral sensibilities before it began to threaten their physical well-being. The Catholic Church was one of the institutions most aggressively attacked by the Revolutionaries. In August of 1789, the clergy was forced to renounce their privileges; in October, the National Assembly stripped the Church of its material goods; and in February of 1790, all the religious orders were suppressed. However, by an exception clause, the congregations that served the common good in hospitals and schools were allowed to remain in existence.

The blow that began radical changes for the Sisters of St. Joseph came from the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, promulgated on July 12, 1790. With the intention of nationalizing the Church, the Constitution changed the structures of dioceses and parishes, and replaced the authority of the pope and bishops with a democratic system of appointments in which every citizen, Catholic or not, had the right to vote in the election of the bishop and the pastor of the region. In November 1790, a law was passed requiring all priests to swear allegiance to the Civil Constitution. Non-juring priests, those who refused to take the oath, would lose their position and their means of support.

At first, it was far from easy to discern how to respond to the new laws. To some, the oath appeared to be a matter more patriotic than religious, so it didn't bother them to take it. Later, after the Pope had spoken out, it became clearer that the oath was the government's attempt to break all ties between the Church in France and the Catholic Church. It was at this stage that Father Ollier, the pastor of the parish in which the Monistrol Sisters of St. Joseph lived, used his pulpit to swear the constitutional oath imposed on the clergy. Bishop Galard refused the oath and lost his position. The sisters judged Father Ollier's oath to be an act of apostasy. Because of that, they refused to attend any event or liturgy in his parish. When he came to their hospital during the Corpus Christi procession, not even one of them could be found on the property to participate in the ceremony. The sisters' resistance provoked the pastor to a desire for revenge and a determination that he would impose his will on them. On September 12, 1791, at his instigation, the sisters were denounced for incompetent administration of the hospital.

The official document against them read:

*If there be ministrations necessary and useful to the public, that of the hospital should be among the number and should be placed in the rank of others; consequently, one must hasten to establish and organize an administration worthy of the wishes of the municipality and which will do honor to our native town. It is time to pluck out vices, to say nothing of scandal. The poor of this house have fallen under the direction of the Sisters of St. Joseph who instruct them in such a manner as to keep them from going to Mass or parish catechism. Behold to what they expose these miserable victims who instead of being brought up in Christianity are in the greatest danger of falling into fanaticism! What a horror for this city and what reproaches would it not deserve if, after receiving so much praise for patriotism and zeal everywhere, you neglect to organize that administration now.*

Even after having been accused of being poor administrators and fanatics, the sisters were not expelled from the hospital. In reality, their service was too important in the town and there was no one to replace them.

Meanwhile, Father Ollier decided that if public humiliation did not bring them to collaborate with him, he could try intimidation. Once again, he found allies ready to help him. One day they went armed with hatchets ready to break down the doors if they were refused admittance. Mother Saint John did not give

them this trouble. She appeared alone and met the excited mob. They asked her to swear that for the future the Sisters would obey the constitution and assist at Mass. Neither their cries nor their threats frightened her. She remained calm and firm in her refusal. When the fanatics tried to advance into the house to see the Sisters and obtain from them what their Mother refused, she placed herself at the door and with great dignity and coolness said: It is useless to present yourselves to the community. Here, the head answers for the body. The men withdrew saying, "What a woman that is! There is nothing to gain from her!"

Although the local priest was unable to depose the sisters, the progress of the Revolution made it inevitable. On August 18, 1792, a decree was promulgated prohibiting religious from administering public institutions. At first, the sisters thought that they could take advantage of a clause of the law that left open one possibility. That clause said that the same people could continue in their service to the poor and the care of the sick if they did it as private individuals and under the vigilance of the municipal corporation. In spite of that hope, and even when they removed the habit and dressed as laypersons, the sisters were not successful in remaining in that ministry. The hospital records indicate that on September 29, 1792, the Sisters of St. Joseph departed from their home at the hospital and returned to their families. However, that statement did not refer to all of the sisters. Three unmarried women, one named Martha, together with Jeanne and Marie Fontbonne, remained there in service to the residents.

In spite of the fact that they did not wear the habit, the sisters remained a thorn in the side of the pastor and he seemed incapable of retreating from the private war he had declared on them. On October 2, only days after the other sisters had left the hospital, there was to be a Mass in honor of the new Republic. Father Ollier invited the sisters, and they were forced to attend. In order to make a public display of his power, he had prepared kneelers for them in full view of the congregation. Before the Mass, he sent a group of men, accompanied by drums, to bring the sisters to the church.

From that point on, the story took on the character of a theatrical performance: The mob went to the hospital beating the drums. The men rang the bell and asked for Jeanne Fontbonne and her Sisters. Without any hesitation, all presented themselves. "What do you want, my friends?" she asked. "We want to take you and your companions to the Mass which the patriot priest is going to say in the parish church." "Never," replied Mother Saint John in a dignified, confident manner. "Never will we consent to communicate with an apostate priest. We would rather die than renounce the Faith," added the Sisters unanimously. Upon this refusal, they were seized and dragged by force to the church. The men, continuing to beat the drums, cried out, "Make way for these three citizenesses whom we are leading to church."

All resistance was useless. The Sisters, calm and dignified, allowed themselves to be led to the kneeling benches, but these strong Christians refused to kneel. They stood erect during the entire ceremony giving no sign of participation in the sacrilegious service.

Leaving the church, Mother Saint John protested aloud against the violence which they had suffered. "Know well," she said, "that by force alone, have we been led to the sacrilegious Mass of an apostate priest. Our hearts and wills had no part therein. We remain inviolably attached and faithful to the true Catholic Faith, and no violence shall ever be able to separate us from it."

Although Mother Saint John was able to undermine Ollier's theater so that she and her sisters won the battle, he had more political power than did she. On October 14, 1792, all the sisters were forced to leave the hospital in Monistrol. The Fontbonne sisters returned to their family home in Bas.



## BAS-EN-BASSET AND SAINT-DIDER

### Chapter Two of the Revolution: A Retreat – At Home and In Prison

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Fontbonne home in Bas became a convent in those days. When Jeanne and Marie arrived there from Monistrol, they found Mother St. Francis and her exiled sisters already there. For a little over a year, they lived in relative tranquility, until the government promulgated a new law ordering that all those who had retired from religious life had to take the oath of fidelity to the state. Those who did not do so could be arrested. When it became dangerous to be in the house, the sisters, like

many non-juring priests, hid in the woods during the day and returned to sleep in the homes of their family or other collaborators. Under those dangerous conditions, faithful Catholics had created an underground Church; they celebrated the Eucharist in secret and the bravest among them stored consecrated hosts in their homes.

Finally, the inevitable happened when Jeanne, Marie, and their companion Martha were arrested. They did not resist the guards who came for them because they did not want them to enter and search the house and thereby find the priests who were then hiding in the Fontbonne home. At that moment, only the sisters from Monistrol were taken, Mother St. Francis and her companions were not discovered.

Because the jails of France were insufficient to hold the number of prisoners being taken, buildings that had been confiscated from the Church were made to serve for the overflow. The Fontbonne sisters were taken 25 kilometers from their home and jailed in the former convent of the Augustinians in Saint-Dider, now known as Montblanc. Inside, everyone was a citizen; there were no titles or professions, but this did not effectively strip the inmates of their dignity. Among the many examples of courage and rebellion by the prisoners, they say that Mother Saint John dominated the jailers by her calm, serene manner. At one point, the guards ordered her to respect the decade: the 10-day system that had replaced the 7-day week. That was her opportunity to teach them about the futility of threatening prisoners of conscience: When they ordered her to work on Sunday she answered very simply: "If I had been willing to do that, I wouldn't be in prison." When they threatened her with solitary confinement, she replied: "Which way do we go to get there?" Already in prison, with the shadow of the guillotine hanging over them, those prisoners had nothing more to lose or to fear.

The families of prisoners were permitted to visit them and the officials counted on the food that they brought to supplement the little that they had to keep the prisoners alive. The visitors also slipped contraband mail to the inmates, allowing them to know what was happening to their friends and families on the outside. Those messages often provided nourishment as vital as the food that came with them.

The people imprisoned for their faith developed a strong solidarity among themselves, even when they were not incarcerated in the same location. All who sacrificed their freedom for the faith were considered saints, and they never knew how many of them would become martyrs. A letter that the sisters received in prison gives witness to the flavor of the solidarity and mutual support they all shared.

The Fontbonne sisters, later accompanied by their aunt, Mother St. Francis, survived their long months in prison. Although the exact dates of their confinement are unknown, there is ample evidence about the general terror of those days. Chaos and cruelty reigned. In three unforgettable days, September 2-5, 1792, more than a thousand prisoners went to their death in Paris, among them, more than three hundred priests and three bishops. The government published pamphlets stating that the guillotine was accomplishing its bloody purpose. Little by little, the sisters learned the names of Sisters of St. Joseph and other friends who had fallen victim to the dementia reigning in the country. They believed their day would come soon.

According to tradition, when one of the guards addressed Mother Saint John saying, "Citizen, tomorrow for you," the sisters believed that their date with the guillotine had arrived. They did not know that tomorrow would simply be the day of their trial. Thinking about tomorrow, the sisters decided to spend the little money they had to wash and prepare their clothes as if they were going to a gala event. Thus, ready to celebrate the last day of their lives, they received the news that Robespierre had fallen and the day would bring them freedom rather than death. When they returned to Bas, Mother St. Francis recovered her convent and was able to reestablish community life there. Mother Saint John did not have the same luck. When she attempted to recuperate the sisters property in Monistrol, she found that it had been sold to a revolutionary patriot who would not even consider selling it to a group of religious. Because of that, she and her sister, Sister Teresa, remained in the home of their parents where they spent the next fifteen years in a life of prayer and service.

## SAINT-ETIENNE

### THE CARDINAL, THE VICAR AND THE NEW COMMUNITY

The chaos of the Revolution affected the personal life of almost every faithful Catholic. Most of the priests and religious who refused to take the oath lost their homes and had to hide, to escape, or be deported. Father Claude Cholleton was among the thousands of French priests who accepted deportation rather than swearing the oath of fidelity to the Republic. When he returned

to France, he again took up his ministry in Saint-Etienne. There, as part of his pastoral work, he brought together a group of pious women, some of whom had been Religious before the Revolution and others who wanted to enter a convent. Given their practice of dressing in black, they were known as .The Black Daughters.. Father Cholleton himself took on the task of their formation because he wanted to reinforce them in a life of contemplation and extraordinary sacrifice.

Before the first sisters had completed their time of formation, Cardinal Joseph Fesch of Lyon named Father Cholleton as his vicar. At that time, Cardinal Fesch was the most powerful prelate in France, largely because he was Napoleon.s maternal uncle. It was not a good idea to ignore a request from Cardinal Fesch. Thus, Father Cholleton had to leave his community in the hands of another director so that he could move to Lyon. The trajectory that brought Father Cholleton, Cardinal Fesch, and Mother Saint John into collaboration was so twisted that it would be difficult to deny that Providence played a role in it. In Lyon, Cholleton spoke to the Cardinal about his concern for his new community. The Cardinal had known Sisters of St. Joseph and he suggested that their congregation might be able to help Cholleton with the task of formation in his new community. Father Cholleton accepted the proposal, but neither of them knew Mother Saint John. At this point, a Capuchin from Monistrol named Father Hubert enters the picture.

He knew Mother Saint John and had heard about the Vicar's plan. When he suggested that Mother Saint John should take responsibility for the community, the Cardinal and Father Cholleton accepted the idea. Thus, seemingly out of nowhere, a messenger from Cardinal Fesch arrived at the Fontbonne house to ask that Mother Saint John return with him to Lyon. She accepted and arrived to stay with her new sisters on August 14, 1807.

This new stage in life must have been difficult for everyone concerned. Father Cholleton had accepted the idea that a religious whom he had never met and who had never lived in the cloister would take charge of his little group. At the age of 49, Mother Saint John had left life in her hometown and

set down roots in a new location with a group of novices whom she had neither received nor tested. Finally, the .Black Daughters accepted an unknown sister from a different tradition as their novice director. There is no doubt that Mother Saint John instilled a new spirit in the group. In the beginning, it was difficult for them to understand and accept the practical type of self-emptying endorsed by their director. In the tradition of the Sisters of St. Joseph, penance was not an end in itself, but rather a means, most often an experience to be accepted rather than a freely chosen practice.

Contending with the Jansenist mortification that seemed to characterize their spirituality, Mother Saint John challenged them with the idea that mortifications like mutual tolerance, weariness from work and care for the sick could be more demanding and efficacious than any penance or suffering they would decide to impose upon themselves. Little by little, they came to comprehend the spirit of the Institute that Mother Saint John represented, and on July 14, 1808, twelve postulants received the habit. They were:

Ana Matrat . Sister St. Francis	Benita Perrin, Sister Marie
Juana María Matrat . Sister St. Clare	Antonieta Monteillier, Sister St. Michael
Ana María Didier, Sister St. Paul	María Ana Pitiot, Sister St. Augustine
Susana Marcoux, Sister St. John the Baptist	Antonieta Cessier, Sister Marie Joseph
Juana Poitrasson, Sister St. Francis de Sales	María Luisa Foret, Sister St. Magdalene
Felipina Menard, Sister Saint Teresa	Elisabeth Plaçon, Sister St. Agnes.

Together with Mother Saint John Fontbonne, these sisters refounded the Congregation under the name of The Society of Saint Joseph because the political climate still did not allow them to call themselves a Congregation. The first group was followed by others and the Society grew rapidly.

#### FROM ST. ETIENNE TO LYON

In 1814, Mother Saint John began to make arrangements to move the community from St. Etienne to Lyon where they would have more space and more direct contact with the seat of the Archdiocese. In 1816, she bought a ruined castle and began a seven-year process of overseeing the necessary renovations. While they were in the midst of the process of construction, the pastor of a neighboring parish brought some orphan girls who needed care, and the new building became an orphanage as well as a convent. Adjusting plans to meet the needs of the neighbor would never be an insurmountable problem.

Another problem arose when the renovated convent was ready for its formal opening on November 28, 1823. The new Vicar of the archdiocese, Father Brouhard, came to see the construction and was scandalized by the large windows that the superior had ordered. In her view, the large windows promoted the physical and emotional health of the inhabitants. In his opinion, they were a luxury opposed to the spirit of poverty. Exercising his authority as ecclesiastical superior, he said he would not permit the novices to reside in the house until the windows were changed. Mother Saint John accepted the imposition of his authority but, instead of remodeling the house, she waited for the arrival of the Bishop de Pins. There is no record of how she explained the problem to him, but after a little more than three months in which the novices could not reside in the house, the bishop revoked the restrictions and on March 5, 1824, all the sisters began to stay under one roof in a house bright with sunlight.

### **BECOMING A GENUINE CONGREGATION**

The Lyon house was not renovated and furnished simply because the community needed more space. Mother Saint John had planned for it to be the motherhouse of many communities. Over time, she had come to see the logic of uniting dispersed communities in a single congregation with numerous houses. She had numerous reasons for coming to that conclusion. Communities of St. Joseph had multiplied in various dioceses in France. Some of those communities lacked the basic human and material resources to be able to accomplish a ministry or have a quality community life. Additionally, carrying on a formation program in each community was a duplication of effort and ran the risk of having formation programs too diverse to maintain fidelity to the foundational charism of the institute. Finally, the new laws of the Republic of France promoted the centralization of congregations of religious.



In addition to the rationale above, their organization in independent communities suffered an institutionalized flaw. Although the Cardinal was the ecclesiastical superior of all of the communities of St. Joseph in his archdiocese, each of those communities remained independent of the others. Over time, the sisters began to recognize this as a weakness because it allowed the Cardinal (or the bishop of any diocese in which they lived) to make changes in the communities while the sisters themselves had no unifying structure or levels of internal appeal. Among the sisters, the most significant reason for coming together was the desire to organize themselves better and form new members with a spirit of unity. In the mind of the Cardinal, the motive for union was the efficacy of centralized governance.

The institution of a congregation with centralized governance was an immense change, a radical reformation of Médaille's Little Design. At the same time, it conformed perfectly to Médaille's inspiration because it was a response to the needs of the time.

While the new congregation continued to receive vocations, there was still some resistance to the idea of a unified congregation on the part of established communities. They felt that union implied a loss of independence and they were not sure about accepting an unknown superior general. In one legendary case, it seems that Mother Saint John went to visit one of those resistant communities without their knowing who she was. She presented herself among them as a sister from the Lyon community who needed a place to stay while she attended to some affairs in their town. She spent time conversing with the sisters and they thoroughly enjoyed the visitor from Lyon. Some of them would surely have taken advantage of conversation to make subtle inquiries about the motherhouse in Lyon and relationships within the growing congregation.

Nobody suspected why their visitor was so well informed about the state of the congregation until she was preparing to return to Lyon. Then one of the local sisters announced, I think that the woman about to take her leave is Mother Saint John. She couldn't deny it. Instead of leaving, she remained with them and dispersed their fears. Before long, that community joined the unified congregation.

By the year 1830, Mother Saint John was 70 years old and had spent 52 of those years as a Sister of St. Joseph. Those years had been among the most turbulent in Western history. The story of her life summarized the experience of many people of her era.

The chaos and suffering caused by the Revolution led the faithful to clarify and deepen their commitment. Aggression against the Church forced those who persevered to discern and discover how the deep meaning of Catholicism stood in contrast to the factions and movements that presented themselves as omniscient. Facing the risk of martyrdom had shed laser-like light on the difference between events of passing importance and the commitments that cannot be broken or brokered. For Mother Saint John Fontbonne and many of her generation, the disgrace of the Revolution was transformed into the grace that helped them develop a deeper faith and genuine holiness.

Even before she entered religious life, Mother Saint John had begun to learn to adjust her plans and dreams to respond to the needs that surrounded her. In Salesian terms, she embraced the need to continually adapt herself, ceding her personal desire to the way God's will became manifest through the signs of the times.

In addition to preparing her for martyrdom, the conflicts and theological confusion engendered by the Revolution helped her develop a critical consciousness. The apostasy of her pastor taught her to beware of blind confidence in people who occupied positions of authority. Nevertheless, she was still capable of collaborating with a powerful Cardinal who called her to begin a project she had never imagined. Following along that path, she was able to open that project to expressions that were not only new, but could be called revolutionary.

Before she died, Mother Saint John had founded or reorganized more than 240 houses of the Congregation, not to mention those that came to life in foreign lands. Some of the communities who joined with her, like the Black Daughters, came from traditions that had little in common with the Little Design. As Superior General, she led her sisters in such a way that they allowed themselves to be in a continual process of reform in order to respond to the needs of the times or, in the words of the Primitive Constitutions, so that they would be of better service to others. The figure of Mother Saint John Fontbonne whom we meet in the traditions is a holy and wise woman. Instead of conceiving a plan and making it happen, she opened herself so that the plan of God could take flesh and become history in her and in the neighbor. This is the woman who, in the third decade of the nineteenth century, when she was 77 years old, opened the congregation to a new expression of its Catholicism: a foundation in America.