

THE SISTERS OF SAINT JOSEPH

The story of the origin of the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph may be divided into two parts—first, that of their foundation of the Feast of Saint Teresa of Avila, October 15, 1650, at LePuy, France, by the ardent and zealous Jesuit, the Reverend John Peter Medaille, S.J., and second, that of its restoration at Lyons by our saintly Foundress, Mother Saint John Fontbonne, after the ravages of the French Revolution.

It was the gentle Saint Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva, who first conceived the idea of the Holy Rule which is now that of the Sisters of St. Joseph. He realized the need of a community which would combine the contemplative with the active life, a community whose prayers would rise in behalf of their fellow-men, and who might also work among the sick and unfortunate, bettering the conditions of society by their Christ-like ministrations, and leading little ones to Him by their teaching and example.

The circumstances of the times, however, precluded a congregation of such a type, and the community actually founded by Saint Francis led a contemplative life. With sublime resignation at the failure of his desire, the gentle Saint uttered the pathetic words: "I am called the Founder of the Visitation. I have done what I did not wish to do, and what I wished to do I have left undone!"

The New Congregation – 1650

The inspiration of Saint Francis de Sales, however, was not to remain fruitless. Not many decades after his holy death, which occurred at Lyons in 1622, Father Medaille, S.J., under the direction of the Holy Ghost and with the concurrence and devoted approbation of the illustrious Bishop of LePuy, Monseigneur Henri de Maupas, founded just such an institute as had been envisioned by the saint. He drew up for the guidance of the Sisters a Rule based on that of his own Saint Ignatius of Loyola, and called the new community the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

God so richly blessed the new congregation that it spread rapidly and flourished throughout France until the outbreak of the French

Revolution in 1789. During the Reign of Terror, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph suffered the agony of its passion. After the darkness and desolation of its Good Friday, God was pleased to use one of its saintly members as the feeble instrument whereby He was to bring about its glorious resuscitation. Let us recall briefly the events of the life of the heroic woman whose privilege it was to gather together her spiritual family and re-establish her dearly beloved community after their cruel trials.

A Valiant Woman

In the year 1759, on March 31, a little girl called Jeanne Fontbonne was born in Bas-en-Basset, France. Her parents were the devout and fervent Michel Fontbonne and Benoite Theilliere. Under the vigilant card, the little Jeanne learned to know God and to Pray to Him. To the delight of her pious parents, as she grew, surprising gifts of nature and of grace appeared in her as her soul responded to the inspirations of God. When the time came for the little girl to attend school, she and her sister Marie were confided to the care of the Sisters of St. Joseph who taught in the convent school of Bas. During their school days they advanced in wisdom and virtue and by a sweet, natural influence and an irresistible charm won the hearts of all.

When their education was completed and they returned to their father's house, the seed of a holy vocation was already taking root in their pure hearts. With mingled joy and sorrow their fond parents learned of the desire of their daughters. Generously, they submitted to the Holy Will of God On July 1, 1778, Jeanne and Marie Fontbonne left Bas and enter the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph at Monistrol.

On December 17, 1778, Marie and Jeanne received the religious habit, Marie being known as Sister Saint Teresa, and Jeanne as Sister Saint John Fontbonne. Fruitful years passed. Both exercised great zeal and displayed rare qualities with which they had been endowed by Heaven. Jeanne especially showed unusual initiative and clear judgment, and in 1785 she became the Superior of the Community of Monistrol which she governed with tenderness and affection for seven years until the storm of the Revolution broke and harshly interrupted the tranquility of the religious life. Every Sister cherished the sweet counsel of Mother St.

John, who was wont to say, "Let us love one another; it is so sweet, so good to be loved! And it is the law of Our Lord!"

Storm Clouds

Misfortune threatened France as the shadows of the Revolution began to gather, and efforts were made to subordinate religion to the state. Bishops and priests who refused to yield to the requirements of the municipality, which were against their conscience, were deposed and exiled and apostates put in their places. The position of the Sisters became more critical every day.

On October 2, 1792, a group of revolutionists knocked at the door of the convent and announced that they were to lead the Sisters of the Mass of a "patriot priest."

"Never," said Mother Saint John, "never will we consent to attend such a Mass!"

"We would rather die than renounce the Faith," added the Sisters unanimously.

Resistance was useless, however, and the Sisters were dragged forcibly to the church, but they gave no sign of participation in the sacrilegious service. On the contrary, Mother St. John protested aloud that it was by force alone that they were there. The crowd was infuriated. The Sisters were forced to leave their convent at Monistrol, and Mother St. John brought her companions to her father's home in Bas.

Fidelity and imprisonment

Mother St. John's parents were glad to receive the Sisters during those dark days, and even provided a chapel for them. The Fontbonne home, moreover, became a refuge and harbor for persecuted priests. But these holy people were not safe for long. The Oath of Liberty and Equality became obligatory for all religious, and since it had been forbidden by the Bishop of LePuy, the Sisters of St. Joseph refused to take it. They had to flee for their lives, and sought shelter in the woods during the day, returning to friendly families at night, under the cover of darkness.

One day, when Mother St. John, her sister Marie, known as Sister Teresa and Sister Martha, weary and spent with privation and fear, had sought refuge in the Fontbonne home, impetuous Revolutionists rushed into the house and demanded the Sisters. To prevent the capture of priests who were hiding in the house at the same time, Mother St. John and her two companions presented themselves at once. They were immediately taken to the prison of St. Didier to the great grief of their sorrowing parents.

The Divine Captiva

Other groups of Sisters who wandered in the woods or took refuge with friends eventually suffered the same fate. Mother St. Francis, an aunt of Mother St. John and Sister Teresa, with her companions, was apprehended and also thrown into the prison of St. Didier. To her surprise and joy, she found her two nieces and Sister Martha there.

No suffering which these noble Sisters endured was equal to that of being deprived of Mass and Holy Communion. Imagine their happiness, then, when one morning a new captive joined them in their dungeon, and whispered to them when the jailer disappeared, "I carry the good God!" Sister Alexis had been able to rescue from profanation a small box of consecrated Hosts while soldiers were ransacking the house where she had been harbored.

The prison was transformed! Mother St. John and the other Sisters knelt in adoration before their Eucharistic Lord veiled by the habit of their companion. Christ, too, was a Captive! The dungeon became a Cenacle where the Sisters carefully preserved their Treasure.

AS soon as it was possible, they informed a priest that their Divine Visitor was abiding with them, and since he was unable to approach the prison, he sent word that the Sisters should communicate with these Hosts. With what holy joy did the Sisters prepare their hearts to receive their God! Their emotion was deep at the touching sight of Mother St. John distributing the Bread of Angels to her companions and receiving It herself.

The Martyr's Palm

Other Communities of the Sisters of St. Joseph were, meanwhile, enduring similar sufferings. In Vernosc, nearby, Sister Sainte Croix, Sister Madeleine and Sister Toussaint had been chained, brutally dragged from their convent, and condemned to death for having given refuge to a priest. On the eve of their execution the Sisters spent the night in prayer, remembering that their Divine Saviour had allowed Himself to be led as a Lamb to slaughter.

They did not cease to chant psalms and prayers, even when at dawn, they were led to their death. Unflinchingly, one by one, they mounted the steps of the guillotine, its steel knife flashing in the rays of the rising sun. Mother Sainte Croix was the first to redden it with her blood. The cruel instrument which severed her noble head from her body, served also to unite her courageous heart with the Sacred Heart of her Heavenly Bridegroom.

Undaunted, calm and recollected, Sister Madeleine advanced with perfect serenity of soul, and without interrupting her prayer, placed her head on the block. As the fall of the knife, she gave forth her pure soul into the Arms of its Maker.

Sister Toussaint, young and delicate, suffered the anguish of seeing the heads of her beloved Sisters dyed in their blood. She suffered a mental martyrdom twice before she reached the guillotine. Her emotion was deep, her failing strength became exhausted, and she fainted. While still in her faint she also was guillotined, and thus all three were privileged to gain the martyr's palm.

News of these executions reached the little group in the prison of St. Didier. Although calm and resigned to God's Holy Will, their souls were plunged in sadness. They, too, awaited martyrdom, and were preparing themselves in the midst of privations and sufferings. They were grieved, not so much for their own misfortunes as for those of France and the Catholic Church. Mother Saint John inspired her companions with her supernatural courage.

The Release

The Sisters had been imprisoned several months, when one day the jailer said to them, "It is your turn tomorrow!"

"Thanks be to God!" exclaimed Mother St. John, trembling with joy.

"Tomorrow," murmured the other Sisters softly, "will be the most beautiful day in our lives."

And they kept watch in prayer through the night, picturing in joyful anticipation the Heaven which was to open for them on the morrow, when they would attend the nuptial feast of the Lamb of God.

The Divine Will, however, ordained otherwise. Heaven was not yet to receive their generous souls. Mother St. John's work was not finished, and in order that she might accomplish her task, Divine Providence gave an unexpected turn to events. When the clanking of the jailer's keys was heard through the dungeon on the following morning, the Sisters were ready and willing to go forth to die for Christ. How disappointed they were when, instead of leading them to the guillotine, the jailer shouted: "Robespierre has fallen! You are free!"

On hearing this news which brought so much joy to others, Mother St. John cried out sorrowfully, "Ah, my Sisters, we are not worthy of the grace to die for our holy religion!"

During the remainder of her life, the saintly Mother regretted having lost the palm of martyrdom which had escaped her at the very moment when she believed herself about to grasp it.

It was necessary that the Religious obtain a certificate of release from prison, and the deed of the release of the Fontbonne sisters from the prison of St Didier is still in the archives of the town of Bas. Tradition says that they left the prison in July but the date of their official release is November 20, 1794.

The revolutionists refused to restore the convent property at Monistrol, and Mother St. John and Sister Teresa had to live in the home of their parents at Bas.

Rebirth and Restoration

When the Reign of Terror had passed, the Archbishop of Lyons, Cardinal Fesch, asked Mother St. John to leave her retreat and go to Saint-Entienne. He proposed that she should reorganize dispersed religious, and that they should once more live in community under her guidance, forming the nucleus of the re-establishment of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

From the blood of saintly martyrs sprang holy and zealous souls, eager to resume or to begin their religious life. The first little Community of Sisters increased and multiplied. Reception and professions took place year after year. The work of the Congregation flourished, and in answer to numerous appeals, the foundations spread through Lyons, and throughout all France. There can be no doubt that Mother St. John was called by God to fulfill a double mission – to establish and to unify – that is to say, to found new convents and to restore others. This organization and unification gave birth to the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Lyons.

It was not long before houses of the Sisters of St. Joseph had been founded in Italy, Corsica, England, Scotland, India, Asia, Africa and in the new world of the Americas. Today the Sisters of St. Joseph may be found even in the Orient.

Happy at the growth and fruitfulness of her spiritual family, Mother St. John thanked God from the fullness of her heart. Did she perhaps envision the almost miraculous spread of the convents of her Sisters throughout the length and breadth of the United States?

Missionaries to the New World

In the year 1834, Bishop Rosati, the first Bishop of St. Louis, invited the Sisters of St. Joseph to his diocese. They gladly accepted his invitation, and Mother St. John asked for volunteers for the work. From the

numerous group divinely inspired to offer themselves for the new fields of labor, seven Sisters were chosen. Among them were Sisters Febroia and Delphine Fontbonne, nieces of Mother St. John. They departed from their fatherland on January 4, 1836.

After an arduous voyage across the broad Atlantic the eager little band of missionaries arrived at St. Louis on March 25, the feast of the Annunciation of Our Lady. The first Convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the United States was a log cabin at Carondelet in the diocese of St. Louis, Missouri. In spite of many difficulties of diverse natures, the Congregation steadily increased.

From the time that the daughters of Mother St. John left Lyons, her maternal interest followed them. The Sisters were wont to say, "Her prayers have been a gentle, fruitful rain on our American mustard seed, as her example, virtue and advice have been for us a torch and a rule of perfection."

The Sisters of St. Joseph in America, whether provincial or diocesan, do not forget that they are daughters of Mother St. John, and the Sisters in France remember that they are the Sisters of those in America.

The Call of Christ

After the establishment of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the United States, not many years of life were left for Mother Saint John. Her long administration was remarkable for her wisdom, her counsels, and her works. Her religious perfection made her a model for all to imitate. In her declining years, she felt her strength failing, and calmly and peacefully waited, wishing only to do the will of God. After sixty-three years of religious profession, God called her to Himself on November 22, 1843, in the eighty-fifth year of her life.

Patience and sweetness characterized our beloved Mother to the end. She died the death of the just, full of years and merit. Long had she been venerated as a perfect religious, the wisest and most prudent of superiors and the most tender of mothers. Prelates, priests and laity, as well as her own religious community, have done honor to her memory as to that of one who was saved from martyrdom to become an apostle.

Supernatural evidences of her power with God were not wanting during her lifetime, nor have they been withheld since her death. Blessings obtained by their Holy Foundress through a life spent solely in the service of God have enriched for more than a century the communities of the Sisters of St. Joseph throughout the world.

Was it Divine Inspiration that cased the saintly John Vianney, better known as the Cure of Ars, to refuse an offering of Masses for the repose of her soul, saying: "Your Reverend Mother does not need them. She is in glory. I know it."

The White Harvest

Especially in the United States of America has the family tree of the Sisters of St. Joseph grown rapidly and put forth new and abundant branches. In 1847 the Right Reverend Bishop of Philadelphia, Francis Patrick Kenrick, requested our Sisters for his diocese, and on May 6, 1847, a foundation was established there. Not many years later, convents of the community were opened in numerous other states. The origin of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Boston may easily be traced from 1847 when the Sisters were sent from Carondelet to Philadelphia, from where in 1851 they established a Brooklyn foundation, and in turn, from Brooklyn's new Motherhouse at Flushing, in 1873, the Sisters of St. Joseph came to the Archdiocese of Boston.

On October 2, 1873, four pioneers from Flushing, Sister Mary Regis, Sister Mary Clare, Sister Mary Fidelis, and Sister Mary Dolores made their convent home a little house on St. Joseph Street in St. Thomas Parish Jamaica Plain. Sister Mary Regis, the first superior became Mother Regis, Foundress of the Boston Congregation, when in 1876 Archbishop Williams canonically erected a novitiate independent of Flushing. The Motherhouse was later opened at Fresh Pond, Cambridge. In 1891 the Community moved its headquarters to Mount Saint Joseph Academy, Brighton, and in 1956 a beautiful new Motherhouse, together with Fontbonne Academy, was built in an attractive, residential section of Milton.

The soil of the Archdiocese of Boston has proved fertile indeed, and from the seed of this first Novitiate, where chosen souls were trained to

religious perfection, have grown and developed the ninety Communities of Sisters of St. Joseph now established in the great Archdiocese as well as two in New Mexico – one at Santa Rosa and one at Santa Fe. It would be impossible to mention them individually here, or to tell of the many and varied undertakings of the Sisters. There were four Sisters of St. Joseph in Boston in 1876. Now, in 1956 there are over nineteen hundred. Every year, on the eighth of September, the doors of the beautiful Novitiate at Framingham open to receive an average of sixty girls, eager to give their youth with all its promise, and consecrate their lives to the service of God in prayer and the zealous works of the apostolate. On March 19, the Feast of our dear Holy Patron, Saint Joseph, these postulants receive the Holy Habit.

A part of the time of preparation of the postulant or the novice is spent in study at the College of Saint Joseph, Framingham. During the first of the three years spent by the Junior Sisters in the Novitiate home, however, their minds are freed from the study of the sciences and arts, that they may learn the science of the Saints and the art of living a devout religious life. When the sacred and happy time of preparation has drawn to a close, the novice is admitted to her Holy Profession and pronounces the three Vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience. Each newly professed Sister is then assigned to a convent where she may pursue the particular field of labor assigned to her in the vineyard of the Master.

Thanksgiving

God in His great goodness has indeed showered His blessings on the Sisters of our community from the time of their invitation to labor in the Archdiocese of Boston by Archbishop Williams to the present day when they gladly give their ecclesiastical allegiance to Archbishop Cushing, in whom they have not only a zealous leader and shepherd, but a kind friend, ever ready and willing to aid them in any enterprise.

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Boston, are, thanks to God's providence, given the means by their prayerful lives to reach a high degree of personal sanctity. By their example and labor, they strive to lead the souls entrusted to their care to the loving Heart of Christ. Thus they

carry on Christ's own work Who Himself lived, labored, and died that all men might be brought to know the love Him and His eternal Father.

For the manifold graces and the bountiful care bestowed by God upon the Sisters of Saint Joseph, all praise be to His Divine Majesty! All honor be to our dearly beloved Holy Patron, Saint Joseph, the just man, the hidden Saint under whose patronage all the works of our Community are undertaken! To our dear Foundress and Restorer after the Revolution, Mother Saint John Fontbonne be the joys of confers in beautification and canonization, and a rich harvest of souls reaped by the labors of the devoted daughters. May their allegiance to her cause, and their fidelity to her mode of life serve to swell the ranks of the Blessed and rejoice the Heart of Christ.