

## **Mother Saint John Fontbonne**

### **CSJ Convocation**

**April 17, 2021**

Most of us know well the story of our founders, the Sisters of St. Joseph. We know well the faith and vision of the first sisters who came together in Le Puy, France in 1650, a time of deep suffering and pain. These six women, Françoise, Claudia, three Anna's and Marguerite, felt called to something new, something different in service of their community. Rather than presuming the needs of their neighbors, they went out and asked how they could best serve them. De quoi avez-vous besoin?" "What do you need," they asked the people. They discovered that the most vulnerable among them were single women: widows and orphans. These women, lacking any protection, any means of supporting themselves, were often forced into lives of prostitution. And as we know, these six sisters, our earliest Sisters of St. Joseph, created a plan: a brilliantly simple and yet profound plan. They taught the women to make lace as a means to a life of security, stability and dignity. These first sisters understood that by teaching women a trade, by providing them a path forward, they would transform lives. A vision we continue to honor and live today across our ministries.

Many of us also know the story of Mother St. John Fontbonne, of her faith, her courage, her vision for the Sisters of St. Joseph. But the thing about stories is that each time they are recounted, the telling reveals something new. Depending on where I sit, depending on the time of year, depending on the state of our world, depending on how tired I am or how invigorated I feel, the story reveals

something different to me every time I hear it. So here we are, gathered remotely, living differently, in a time of pandemic, racial injustice and political divide. Here we are holding our collective breath around the trial of the police officer who killed George Floyd, wondering will justice be done as we reflect on this week's killing of yet another black man, Daunte Wright, stopped for a traffic violation, and the aftermath of yet another school shooting. So when Sr. Maureen, Sr. Sandra and Mary Rose asked me to tell the story – again – I said yes, hoping the retelling would reveal something new for each of us here. For I have learned that the life of Mother Saint John Fontbonne always reveals something powerful, something renewing, something challenging, and something hopeful for me - and I hope to you. And so we tell the story again – to remember, to reflect, to renew ourselves.

Mother St. John Fontbonne was born in the small town of Bas-en-Basset, in France in 1759. As you know, Mount Saint Mary's had the incredible fortune of buying her family home in 2018, bringing back this sacred space into the family of St. Joseph. The second of five children, Jeanne Fontbonne was one of those people who stood out, even as a child. Educated by the Sisters of St. Joseph in Bas-en-Basset, and then later in boarding school in nearby Le Puy, and the niece of a Sister of St. Joseph, Sr. St. Francis, Jeanne was recognized for her many gifts and her leadership skills. There was just something about her. People wanted to be with Jeanne. Her older sister, Marie, often used to say, "Go to Jeanne. She will take care of everything." When Jeanne was 19, the Bishop of Le Puy had the occasion to meet the Fontbonne family. And after a conversation with Jeanne, he confided to her aunt, Sister St. Francis: "Form this little one well. She will be the

glory of your congregation.” Jeanne and her sister Marie entered the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Bishop’s prediction was fulfilled. Given the name of Sr. St. Jean Fontbonne, in English, Sr. St. John Fontbonne, Jeanne became superior of the community at age 26, garnishing the respect and the love of all who crossed her path, both in the community and in the towns in which she served.

A gifted leader, Mother Saint John served her first community in Monistrol, France leading up to and during the French Revolution. And as the Revolution dismantled much of society that was seen as corrupt or elite, the Catholic Church was targeted as a threat to the new order. Religious men and women were mandated to take a constitutional oath declaring their loyalty to the state of France rather than the Church in Rome. Refusal to do so resulted in imprisonment and/or death. The parish priest in Monistrol took the oath and demanded in church that Mother St. John do the same. Accompanied by two Sisters, she stood up in the church that still stands today, the church where she had been dragged to make a public denunciation of her faith - and refused. Her words stir our hearts today:

“Our heart and our will had no part in this. We remain faithful and totally attached to the true faith, and no violence will ever be able to separate us from this faith.”

Following this act of courage and resistance, Mother St. John was forced to return to her family home in Bas-en-Basset and eventually had to go into hiding to avoid arrest. The Fontbonne family not only hid Jeanne and her sister, Marie, they opened the family home to other men and women religious to keep them

safe. They saved countless lives in this home. Alerted by suspicious neighbors about the comings and goings to the house, it was often searched by guards. One day, when the guards arrived to conduct such a search, Jeanne knew that they would discover the priest who was hiding inside and she feared that her father would be arrested and so to save them, she and her sister Marie surrendered themselves and were subsequently imprisoned.

Even in prison, Mother St. John remained faithful, hopeful and a comfort to those incarcerated with her. Records reveal that she did not fear death and actually saw the opportunity to be martyred for her faith as a special blessing. In fact, upon learning that she was to be guillotined the following day, she proclaimed it the “most beautiful day of our lives.” Ironically, that same night the revolutionary Robespierre was overthrown and the Sisters were freed. She and her sister Marie returned to the home in Bas-en-Basset where they passed many years caring for their aging parents.

But Mother St. John’s work was not done. Eventually, under the Napoleonic government, Mother Saint John was asked to form a new group of women religious who were known for their deep faith but also for their austere approach to their vocation. I wonder what it was like to consider starting over, having lost all that she and others had worked so hard to establish. Her parents did not want her to go. Her mother even went so far as to say that Jeanne was not stable, that her judgement was faulty since her imprisonment, but Mother St. John accepted the call and once again, said, “yes.”

The new beginning for the Sisters of St. Joseph marks a pivotal moment in our history. Mother St. John worked with these women to form them in the way of the Sisters of St. Joseph, bringing to their vocation, a sense of joy and a commitment to the profound love of God and love of neighbor without distinction. When these new sisters took the habit of the Sisters of St. Joseph, a new and remarkable chapter in the history of the Sisters took shape. The priest overseeing the ceremony stated these prophetic words: “You are not very numerous, my daughters, but as a swarm of bees you will spread everywhere. You will be as numerous as the stars.” And in the ensuing years, Mother St. John inspired women to join the burgeoning order, founding houses of Sisters in numerous cities across France. And finally, as calls for Sisters of St. Joseph came from many parts of the globe, including St. Louis, Missouri, Mother Saint John sent six women, including two of her nieces, to this continent where they founded a school for the deaf in Carondelet, Missouri. I think about how it must have felt to send these women to an unknown world, understanding full well, that even if they survived, she would not see them again. I wonder at her courage in trusting the expansive work of God. We are here because of this brave and visionary leader who said yes – again and again.

Mother Saint John served as Superior of the ever growing order until the age of 80. Throughout her leadership she was admired and loved for her optimism in the face of difficulty, her fearlessness in the face of violence and injustice, her intelligence and resolve in the face of challenge, her compassion in the face of pain, her honesty, sensitivity, kindness, her abiding faith and the profound sense of joy she exuded. Mother St. John Fontbonne stands as a

cornerstone of the foundation of our history. Knowing her, we understand better the lives and the love of the Sisters who have followed, the Sisters with us here today.

As we reflect on her life, I find myself thinking about her unshakable faith, even at the most painful and challenging moments: Refusing to make an oath of fidelity to the revolutionary government; surrendering her own life to save that of her father and a trusting priest; preparing to face the guillotine; leaving her home at a time when her parents needed her to lead a new group of women and reconstitute the Sisters of St. Joseph, sending her beloved sisters off to a strange land to serve a different continent. And to face each of these moments with faith, optimism and confidence.

We are in the midst of a time of great challenge – personally, professionally and as members of the greater community of Los Angeles, San Diego, Concord and the world. We have tried to do our best for those in our care – continuing to educate, to house, to feed, to calm, to bring hope. And we are weary. And yet, we are still called to do the all-important work of unifying love.

As we retell this story, let us ponder how Mother Saint John found light, hope, joy and the ability to lead with love at moments that would shake many of us – certainly me. As we reflect on our commitment as leaders of these CSJ ministries, how does this story of our beginnings inform us? What does it ask of us? I ask you to think together about how we live this charism in the circumstances in which we find ourselves today. What are the questions that sit in our hearts? Where do we find light, hope, joy in these days? What can we

learn from Mother St. John, from the stories of so many faithful women, to help us in our work?

We will take about 20 minutes to reflect on these questions together in our affinity groups. And then we will come together as a full group to share some of our insights.