"O, my sisters, let us love one another."

– MOTHER ST. JOHN FONTBONNE
Facing down terror

In the social unrest leading up to the French Revolution, the government passed increasingly oppressive laws aimed at shutting down convents and monasteries. The work of the Sisters of St. Joseph continued to be valued, but their poverty deepened. They made lace, an important industry in France at the time, to feed themselves. But industries that served the rich in Europe began to fail, and the market for their intricate handiwork vanished.

In 1789, the French Revolution engulfed the country. The new government demanded that the clergy break with Rome and pledge allegiance to the Republic. Those who refused were threatened with prison and execution.

Mother St. John and the Sisters lived hand-in-hand with their struggling neighbors during this frightening time, sharing their privations and ministering to their needs. They were constantly targeted by the new state. Clergy and Sisters lost their homes and property for refusing to swear loyalty to the government. The gravest offense was to hide priests who refused to forsake the Church and declare allegiance to the revolution.

Many Sisters were put under house arrest or imprisoned, including Mother St. John, who was held for a time at Montfranc. The harshness of their treatment and conditions varied from place to place, but all endured the pain of seeing the torment of faithful lay people and clergy. Tragically, five Sisters of St. Joseph were guillotined.

Ministering in secrecy

In 1793, Sisters in the city of Le Puy were thrown out of the Montferrand Hospital, where they cared for the sick, and forbidden to live together. Their convent, where the Sisters of St. Joseph were founded, was turned into a prison, and the Sisters were ordered to pay for their bars and guards.

“In Europe, as well as in America, God is everywhere, witness of our works and struggles. …”

– MOTHER ST. JOHN FONTBONNE

Mother St. John and many Sisters of St. Joseph were imprisoned during the French Revolution for refusing to abandon the Church and pledge loyalty to the government.
The mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph is to bring all people to God, reconcile differences, and serve their neighbors without distinction by caring for the vulnerable and teaching the faith.

The Sisters under Mother St. John disbanded and went into hiding in their parents’ homes. They continued their work with the poor in secret, however, despite the risk of arrest and further persecution.

Years of rebuilding

By the time the French Revolution ended in 1799, the Sisters of St. Joseph had scattered, their communities shattered by 10 years of turmoil.

Mother St. John’s community had changed irrevocably. The Sisters’ property in Monistrol had been sold, leaving them with nowhere to re-establish their motherhouse. While the Sisters spent the next 12 years working from their parents’ homes, Mother St. John met with them to nurture the love of God and service that had originally brought them together.

As the French Revolution gave way to the era of Napoleon, the Catholic Church was welcomed back in France. In 1807, the Diocese of St. Etienne asked Mother St. John to re-establish a community of Sisters in the small city south of Lyon. Mother St. John, now 50, gathered together 12 Sisters from torn communities and established a ministry that worked extensively with the sick and dying.

“I implore God to pour down upon you God’s choicest blessings and assist you always with God’s grace.”

– MOTHER ST. JOHN FONTBONNE

Motherhouse moves to Lyon

In time, the motherhouse in St. Etienne was moved to Lyon, a city originally founded by the Romans and besieged by the French army during the revolution. Mother St. John obtained funding to buy a former monastery, and soon the Sisters were repairing its windows and walls. Their numbers grew quickly as dislocated Sisters returned to the order and new women joined.

They continued to live in poverty and took up home industries, like lace making, to provide for themselves.
The world changes and so do the sisters

Under Mother St. John’s leadership and vision, the Sisters of St. Joseph opened 200 communities across southeast France within several years. But it was a changed world, and the Sisters were compelled to change along with it. The Sisters of St. Joseph were founded on the idea that the order would be made up of independent communities that served and educated the poor in their own way with guidance from God.

By the turn of the century, however, religious communities had to justify their existence to the government as contributing to the social good. Unfortunately, community life and prayer were not seen as social benefits.

Mother St. John’s challenges

Ecclesial authorities sought to have considerable say in the lives of the Sisters as the Church tried to restore its role among the faithful and in broader society. There was a push from all sides to consolidate religious life. In response, Mother St. John gathered the Sisters’ small independent communities under centralized governance.

Inside convents, Sisters who once enjoyed a measure of independence occasionally chafed at new rules, a narrower culture and uniform organizational structures. One of Mother St. John’s biggest challenges was building unity and renewing enthusiasm for the Sisters’ work. Soon, a new mission would call.

The New World calls

In the early 19th century, European nations were expanding around the world, creating new trade and sending citizens to explore new lands. Catholic clergy already in America needed help to expand their ministries. In 1836, the bishop of St. Louis, hearing of the good works of the Sisters of St. Joseph, raised money to bring a group to America.

Mother St. John embraced the plan immediately, asking for volunteers from among the Sisters. She didn’t gloss over the hardships and dangers the Sisters would face in this new land, which lacked so much of the infrastructure and development that had grown over centuries in Europe.

Legacy of faith and resilience

Seven Sisters were chosen for the voyage, including two of Mother St. John’s nieces. She corresponded regularly with the pioneering Sisters.

In one letter, she wrote:

“In whatever part of the world we may be, we are never exiled. … In Europe, as well as in America, God is everywhere, witness of our works and struggles. … My entire wish is that you be saints, and that your communities be … edifying. I implore God to pour down upon you God’s choicest blessings and assist you always with God’s grace.”

Mother St. John died at 83 in Lyon. She is one of the most revered figures in the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph, most notably as a resilient figure who survived the French Revolution through her faith in God and met the challenge of rebuilding the order in the years afterward.

Her steadfast faith, vision and determination were crucial for the successful expansion of the Sisters of St. Joseph to America, where their work still thrives today.

“Trust has been my strength throughout the sorrows, difficulties and tribulations of my long life. God can do everything; without Him I can do nothing; like children, we must throw ourselves in His arms.”

– MOTHER ST. JOHN FONTBONNE
Mother St. John held the Sisters of St. Joseph together during the French Revolution, led their expansion in the following years and organized their journey to the New World.
Like many women in 17th century France, the Sisters of St. Joseph supported themselves by making lace, prized by the wealthy classes across Europe as decorative trim for clothing, linen and furniture.

As part of their ministry with the poor and sick, the Sisters taught lace making to women with no skills. Even women of the middle class, including many Sisters, were illiterate during this time, and lace making was one of the few ways they could earn a living.

Women gathered in groups to do their handiwork, and this provided a time for quiet conversation, prayer and singing, and a way for the Sisters to further their highest purpose: bringing all people to God.

**Tools of the trade**

Five items were needed to make lace:

- A pillow
- Bobbins
- Straight pins
- Thread
- A pattern

**Branding and twisting**

The pins were used to secure and outline the pattern on the pillow. Then the lace maker would braid and twist thread on the bobbins around the pins to create lace according to the pattern. When the pattern was complete, the lace maker would remove the pins from the pillow to release her intricate work.

Some patterns required more than 50 pins and 40 bobbins, making the creation of lace a time-consuming and costly craft.

**Revolution and revival**

When France plunged into the French Revolution, much of the nation’s economy, including luxury industries, collapsed. This caused years of economic dislocation and even deeper poverty for the Sisters and many other women.

The textile industry recovered after the revolution and Le Puy, where the Sisters of St. Joseph were founded, is still known today for its delicate lace.

*Intricate lace patterns required weaving with many bobbins of thread. The laborious craft served Europe’s wealthy, who used lace to decorate clothes and linens.*