

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ST. LOUIS PROVINCE OF THE SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH OF CARONDELET

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet is a congregation of women religious which traces its origin to and follows the spirit of the foundation made in LePuy-Velay, France around 1650 by Jean Pierre Medaille, a Jesuit priest, with Françoise Eyraud and her five women companions, under the pastoral care of Henri de Maupas, Bishop of LePuy. Dedicated to the practice of all the spiritual and corporal works of mercy of which woman is capable and which will most benefit the dear neighbor (Primitive Documents), the community had a rapid growth until the time of the French Revolution when convents were suppressed and the sisters were forced to live as lay persons. Mother St. John Fontbonne was one of these sisters. She returned to her parental home and continued to minister to others as she had done before. Many sisters were imprisoned and some guillotined, and Mother St. John herself was arrested and placed in the prison at St. Didier. However, the crown of martyrdom was not to be hers – the eve of the day scheduled for her execution saw the fall of Robespierre – July 27, 1794 – which meant the end of the Reign of Terror. So, released from prison, she and her companions returned again to her parent's home. In 1807 Cardinal Fesch, Bishop of Lyons, asked her to reestablish the Sisters of St. Joseph in his diocese. So through Mother St. John the Congregation maintains continuity with the community founded by Father Medaille.

A combination of circumstances contributed to the first establishment of the Sisters of St. Joseph in America. Through her work with the Propagation of the Faith, Felicité Duras, a Countess, was greatly moved by a letter from Bishop Rosati, the first Bishop of St. Louis, asking for sisters who would undertake instruction of deaf-mutes. She offered to defray the expense of establishing a community of Sisters of St. Joseph in this diocese of St. Louis. She had a great love and admiration for Mother St. John Fontbonne and asked her to send the sisters to America. The bishop would accept six sisters to instruct the children, and in addition to these six, two others be included to teach the deaf.

So the first six sisters, the oldest 30, the youngest 21, set sail from LeHavre, France January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1836 on the ship, the *Natchez*. They arrived in New Orleans March 5<sup>th</sup> after seven weeks at sea. Bishop Rosati had arranged for them to stay with the Ursuline Sisters and met with them the next day. (And he planned to travel north with them to St. Louis.)

The sisters enjoyed the hospitality of the Ursulines for two weeks, learning much about life in America. The sisters also told them to disguise their religious habit when going abroad and while traveling to St. Louis

They boarded the steamer, the *George Collier*, traveled up the Mississippi and reached their destination March 25, 1836.

Through Holy Week the sisters resided with the Daughters of Charity who had a hospital near the Cathedral.

In a letter of introduction the Archbishop of Lyons recommended the sisters by stating – “They will be excellent catechists, good infirmarians, and zealous instructors.”

So when these Sisters of St. Joseph arrived at their first foundation outside Europe, they brought with them the heritage of a tradition nearly two hundred years old.

While waiting to occupy the log cabin in Carondelet, about five miles south of the city of St. Louis, three of the sisters studied English under the tutelage of the Madames of the Sacred Heart. Anne Eliza Dillon, who was a student there, through her association with the sisters became our first American postulant.

From Carondelet many institutions had their start and continue their good works to the present day. St. Joseph Institute for the Deaf, St. Joseph's Academy, Fontbonne College, now Fontbonne University, all began in the convent at Carondelet.

Within church structures the sisters developed professionally into a well-educated and competent group of women, administrating and teaching in schools and institutes of higher learning, caring for the sick in hospitals and homes/programs for the elderly, caring for the deaf, the orphans, later caring for the young victims of their society in residential or day centers.

Today we continue to work closely with lay persons as we serve in parishes, schools, colleges, universities and diocesan offices; in health care, child care, deaf education, youth ministry and adult education – literacy programs; in homes and programs for the elderly, in social work, neighborhood and community development and social concerns; as artists, consultants, counselors, and spiritual directors. In a special way we are in partnership with men and women who are desirous of sharing the mission of Jesus. As non-vowed Associates, they meet regularly to share life and prayer with one another and to share in the Church's mission with the Sisters of St. Joseph.