



BIOGRAPHY OF SAINT JEANNE DE LESTONNAC

Her early years

Jeanne was born in 1556, in Bordeaux, France. She was the oldest child of a very prominent family of the same city. Her father, Richard de Lestonnac was a councilor in Parliament and her mother, Jeanne Eyquem, was the sister of the renowned humanist philosopher Michel de Montaigne, author of the *Essays*. The rich renaissance culture greatly influenced his education.

Calvinism invaded France and the Wars of Religion destroyed the country. Her mother, seduced by the Reform, tried to lead her daughter into following the same path. Jeanne found support in two staunch defenders of the Catholic Faith: her father and her uncle Michel who perceived her inner conflict.

The adolescent faith of Jeanne grew; it was tested, protected, and reaffirmed. The Spirit strengthened her interiorly: “DO NOT ALLOW THE FIRE THAT I HAVE ENKINDLED IN YOUR HEART TO BE EXTINGUISHED...”

Wife and Mother

At the age of 17 she married Gaston de Montferrant. Their shared love of 24 years was blessed with seven children. Then months of suffering and detachment followed with the death of her husband and oldest son, followed again by the death of her father and uncle. Jeanne on her own had to complete the education of her children and set them on their future paths. She was another “strong” woman of the Bible.

The Cistercian Experience

God continued to call her. Her children no longer needed her and she finally entered the Feuillantine Cistercians in Toulouse at the age of 46. She took the name of Jeanne of Saint Bernard. She enjoyed her new life: long hours of prayer and penance, silence and abnegation, infinite peace. These were six months of difficult lessons. Nonetheless, she grew in the deep desire to give her life totally to God. Her body was weak and could not match the strength of her spirit. It became evident that she would have to give it up, to find another path....

She begged the Holy Spirit to shed light on her darkness. Suddenly she experienced a two-fold vision: a multitude of youth in danger and the Blessed Mother who encouraged a response. Jeanne de Lestonnac understood: the radical giving of her life to the Lord would be in extending her hand to youth and living the attitudes of MARY. She sensed that she would live out this mission with others, who would also be called.

Foundress of the Company of Mary Our Lady

Upon her departure from the Feuillantine Cistercian monastery, Jeanne retired to La Mothe, part of her former estate. She lived a long period of discernment and began to give shape to the new Institute by which she would try to respond to the specific needs of France in the XVII century: the holistic education of young women. In 1605 Bordeaux suffered a severe outbreak of the plague. Jeanne put her own health and life at risk by caring for the people in the most affected neighborhoods. There she discovered the mystery of the poor, the living presence of Jesus. In this service she met young women who, feeling the call of the Lord and attracted by her personality, joined her apostolic project. She progressively found how her own sentiments and inner movements were expressed in Ignatian spirituality. She contacted Fathers de Bordes and Raymond, two Jesuit fathers who wished to see something done for the girls similar to what the Jesuits were doing for the boys in Bordeaux.