

# HISTORY OF THE ORDER OF THE COMPANY OF MARY OUR LADY

The history of the Order of the Company of Mary Our Lady has its origin in the early seventeenth century. Between 1600 and 1650, years that coincide with the founding of the Company of Mary and the death of Jeanne de Lestonnac- there was an unexpected turn of events resulting in a severe social crisis that lasted two centuries, the most serious of its kind. It gave birth to a new concept of humankind, the modern man.

The new institute, approved by Paul V in 1607, was the first religious order of women-teachers approved by the Church. The Company of Mary was born under the sign of this new age, primarily by the unique characteristics that differentiated it from the traditional female orders. With it began a new religious lifestyle; thus the start of a series of female Congregations with Ignatian spirituality.

In the beginning, Jeanne de Lestonnac suffered the criticism of her contemporaries. The educational focus of her work for the integral and comprehensive formation of women, however, was considered "useful to people" by the city's population and government. She thus succeeded in filling her school with girls. The foundress' insistence that the education of youth should always "be done more effectively" was a call to the qualitative and quantitative growth of the Institute. On the death of Jeanne de Lestonnac in 1640, the Order of the Company of Mary had 30 houses founded in France; 10 years later the first foundation in Spain took place in Barcelona.

The eighteenth century was very fruitful for the Company of Mary, expanding from Spain to Latin America. However, as the Order extended into Spanish speaking lands, the Houses in France painfully experience the disappearance of all its communities, 50 in total. As a result of the French Revolution the sisters were dispersed and some of them were put to death. Nor was this be the only test; it also suffered the impact of the confiscation of all its properties in a series of adverse actions against the Church taking place, one after the other, during the nineteenth and part of the twentieth century in different countries. This had a direct impact on the educational works of the Company of Mary in France, Spain and America. The new foundations in Belgium, Holland, Italy, Mexico and California by expatriate religious were a positive result of severe adverse situations.

A few years after the Final Union of the houses of the Company and as a result of the renewal promoted by the Second Vatican Council, the Company of Mary broadened its understanding of its evangelizing mission as educators, recognizing that it could take place in different platforms: school, university, socio-educational centers, in the health field, parish, amid the most vulnerable in society: immigrants, displaced peasants ... in organizations working for the defense of life, dignity, the rights of individuals and of peoples. It was to be a single mission in a plurality of scenarios: to evangelize as educators in the service of a faith that bears fruit in works of justice. It is a single

educational mission whose priorities are youth, the woman and the family as the preferential field.

More than 400 years of history, a long chain of dedication, speak of a continuous succession of women who have courageously faced situations arising in different countries throughout time: scientific and technological advancements, cultural changes, revolutions, adverse laws, persecution and ... death. They have sometimes been appreciated and other times stripped of all they had, but they managed to "keep the flame alive" and "extend a hand" wherever there has been a need. Driven by a deep faith in the God of history and drawn by Jesus of Nazareth they have devoted their lives to the mission of building his Kingdom.

Today the story continues ... in 26 countries on four continents: Europe America, Africa and Asia, with 1470 religious and a large number of laity committed to the educational mission of the Company of Mary.

