

Jeanne Chezard de Matel

Jeanne Chezard de Matel (6 November 1596 – 1670) was the French mystic who founded the [Order of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament](#), the rule and constitutions of the order being approved in 1633. The principal objective of the order was youth education.



Jeanne was born on Nov. 6, 1596, in Roanne, in the Diocese of Lyons, France, the daughter of Jean Chézard, a French army officer and nobleman, and his wife, Jeanne Chaurier, whose first four children had been stillborn or had died as infants. Jean was baptized the same day in St. Stephen's Church. Two small children who came to the door begging were her godparents. As she grew in her spirituality, she was drawn especially to Mary, the Mother of the Incarnate Word, to St. Joseph and to Michael the Archangel.

In 1608, at the age of 12, Jeanne was permitted to make her first Communion. In her teens she lived an active social life, loving parties, dancing, fun and laughter.

In 1616, her father wanted her to marry, however, Jeanne felt that God was calling her to religious life, but she wasn't clear about where. At one time, she thought she had a Carmelite vocation; at another time, she had considered joining the Ursulines. It also appears from her writings that she pondered becoming a member of the Visitation and Franciscan Orders. During her twenties, she spent six years trying to discern her vocation. Jeanne was endowed with the gift of infused contemplation and had vivid experiences of God's presence.

On July 2, 1625, at age twenty-nine, and guided by her spiritual directors, Jeanne began the work of founding the Order of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament with two companions in Roanne, but soon moved to Lyon. At the early stages, she thought of naming the Order after the Lamb of God, whose peace would bring about "a gentle, peaceful relationship between God and our soul." Yet in prayer and discernment, Jesus is said to have revealed to her that the name of the Order was to be only "Incarnate Word, for in this is expressed all of who I am."

Monseigneur de Miron, the Archbishop of Lyon, died unexpectedly after having occupied the archepiscopal See for only two years. His successor, Cardinal Alphonse Louis de Richelieu, brother of the famous Prime Minister under Louis XIII, maintained an unwavering opposition to Mother de Matel's foundation. Confronted with the dispositions of the new archbishop, Mother de Matel's situation became both difficult and critical. Many women joined Jeanne with a desire to live a religious life. During these years Jeanne sought consent to found the Order in Roanne, Lyons and Paris. While waiting for church approval to establish the new group as an Order, the community established boarding schools for girls.

Throughout her life, both personally and as a foundress, Jeanne encountered opposition, criticism, and other difficulties. She even delayed to fulfill her desire to take the habit and make profession of religious vows to establish the Order. It was only on her deathbed that Jeanne's desire was realized. Against all odds, Jeanne de Matel received the habit of the Order she had founded and made her religious profession, a few hours before her death in the early morning of September 11, 1670.

Sisters of the Incarnate Word

She established four foundations of the Order in France: Avignon (1639); Grenoble (1643); Paris (1644); and Lyon (1655).[[] Additional monasteries were established at Anduze (1697) and Roquemaure (1697). During the French Revolution the Incarnate Word houses shared the fate of all religious houses throughout the country, and were suppressed by the Decree of 1790.

The Sisters who survived persecution were dispersed. Many struggled to remain faithful to their commitment to the Incarnate Word, protecting the relics and writings of Jeanne, and the other guiding documents of their Order. In 1817 the Order was re-established in the village of Azerables, France.

On March 23, 1852, responding to the request from Bishop Odin of Texas, Sr. Claire Valentine, Sr. Ange Barre, Sr. Dominic Ravier and Sr. Ephrem Satin traveled from Lyon to Texas to serve in the field of education. After a 3-month voyage and 7 months in Galveston learning English and Spanish, the Sisters landed at then Point Isabel in the middle of January, 1853, and traveled to Brownsville.[[] Houses were also founded in Cleveland, Ohio and Mexico. The Order helped establish another Order, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.

Venerable

On March 7, 1992, Pope John Paul II declared that she had lived a life of heroic sanctity and accorded her the title, Venerable.[]

Legacy

The Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament of Victoria, Texas, along with Sister Congregations in Corpus Christi and Houston, Texas, and Cleveland, Ohio, and with many Sisters in Mexico, now serve in the Americas, Europe, and Africa. They serve primarily through ministries of prayer, Christian education, and health care according to the needs of the Church today.