

History & Heritage

St. Joseph Health
System
500 S. Main Street
Suite 1000
Orange CA 92868
U.S. Mail
P.O. Box 14132
Orange CA 92863
(714) 347-7500
www.stjoe.org

Northern California

St. Joseph Hospital

Redwood Memorial
Hospital

Santa Rosa Memorial
Hospital

Petaluma Valley
Hospital

St. Joseph Home
Care Network of

Northern California
Napa County

Queen of the Valley
Hospital

Southern California

St. Mary Medical
Center

St. Jude Medical
Center

St. Jude Heritage
Medical Group

St. Joseph Hospital

St. Joseph Health
System Home Health
Agency

Mission Hospital
System Office

West Texas /
Eastern New Mexico

Covenant Health
System

St. Joseph Health System is a ministry of The Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, who trace their roots back to 17th Century France and the unique vision of a Jesuit priest named Jean-Pierre Medaille. He sought to organize an order of religious women who, rather than remaining safely cloistered in a convent, would venture out into the community, seek out "the dear neighbors" and minister to their needs. The congregation managed to survive the turbulence of the French Revolution and eventually expanded, not only throughout France, but throughout the world.

In 1912, a small contingent of the Sisters of St. Joseph came to Eureka, California, at the invitation of the local bishop, to establish a school. A few years later, the great influenza epidemic of 1918 caused the sisters to temporarily abandon their education efforts to care for the sick in their homes. They realized immediately that the small community desperately needed a hospital. In 1920, the sisters opened 28-bed St. Joseph Hospital of Eureka, and their new health care ministry was born.

History of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange

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The Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange were founded in Le Puy France in 1650. The people of France were suffering the after effects of a series of terrible wars and there were many widows, orphans, homeless and sick with no social structures to care for them. Pious women, many of them widows, were trying to help where they could.

Father Jean Pierre Medaille, a traveling Jesuit priest and missionary, was sent to preach in the parishes and was touched by the selfless efforts of these pious women. He launched an effort to organize the women into a religious congregation so they could continue their good works with the support only a formal, religious community could provide. Fr. Medaille named the community Sisters of Saint Joseph. He wrote a Constitution for the new group, the essence of which still guides their efforts. In 1651 the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange became an official congregation in the Church.

The purpose of the congregation was to live and work to bring all people into union with God and with one another, serving their spiritual and corporal needs in all works of mercy within the power of the Sisters. And they went forth to "...divide the town(s) into various sectors, find out what disorders exist in each sector, and try to remedy them through your own efforts, if you can, or through persons who have some influence over those involved in these disorders."

There was a great demand for lace in Europe in the 17th Century and the city of Le Puy was renowned for the exquisite lace produced there. Many of the Sisters were lace makers and were able to sell it to help with the expenses of their new community.

The social custom of the day required a woman to be accompanied by a man whenever she left her home. To get around this custom the Sisters dressed as widows, who were allowed in public alone. The former nun's habit traces its roots back to a widow's dress and it helped the Sisters avoid undue attention as they went about their daily activities.

The community grew rapidly until the French Revolution when the State ordered the Sisters to take off their religious garb and go home. The Sisters disbanded and five even died on the guillotine. But the spirit of their community lived on.

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When the Revolution ended, Bishop Fesch of Lyon asked the Sisters of Saint Joseph to once again serve his diocese. He asked his priests to seek out Mother Saint John Fontbonne, who had been a superior of the order before the fighting began. She was asked to begin the congregation again. When she told the Bishop she didn't know where any of the original Sisters were he told Mother Saint John about a group of Sisters from another congregation who had stayed together during the war and had asked him for help in getting established again. Mother trained the new congregation to become Sisters of St. Joseph and they quickly re-established the community in Lyons.

Again the Sisters of St. Joseph grew rapidly and their support was asked for in several areas. Countess de Rochejaqueline asked to send Sisters of Saint Joseph to the new world where they would teach and Christianize the Native Americans. And the Bishop of St. Louis asked for Sisters to help him in his very large diocese. In 1836, six Sisters of St. Joseph departed by ship for St. Louis. Their trip was paid for by the Countess and they settled in the small town of Carondelet. That group eventually built a Motherhouse and then sent out two to three Sisters at a time to different parts of the country to begin new communities financially independent of St. Louis.

The Sisters' final move to California was initiated by a priest who had been transferred from La Grange to the Sacramento Diocese. That priest wrote to the Superior of the St. Joseph order and asked if a group of Sisters would come to work with him in California. Under the leadership of Mother Bernard that initial group came to Eureka. They built a Motherhouse, many schools and their first hospital. And the story of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange in America began.