

Born in Bas-en-Basset, Haute-Loire, on 31 March 1759, Jeanne Fontbonne was the youngest child of Michel and Jeanne Theillère Fontbonne. In 1778 she entered a house of the Sisters of St. Joseph, which had just been established at Monistrol (by Bishop de Gallard of Le Puy. At the age of 26 she was chosen by the community to be their Superior and remained there until the French Revolution.

At the outbreak of the French Revolution she and her community refused to sign the Oath of [Civil Constitution of the Clergy](#). Forced to disperse her community, she remained until she was forced to leave, and the convent taken possession of by the Commune. She returned to her father's home, and was soon imprisoned for 11 months and only the fall of Robespierre on the day before that appointed for the execution saved her from the guillotine. In 1807, Mother St. John was called to Saint-Étienne to assume responsibility for a group of young women and members of dispersed congregations. Under Mother St. John's formation, these women became the first Sisters of St. Joseph of Lyon. On 10 April 1812, the congregation received government authorization and in 1816 Mother St. John was appointed Superior General of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Before the Revolution, small groups of Sisters lived close to the people, wearing ordinary dress, they visited the homes of people who were sick and poor and helped all in need. The government required a different model, centralized into diocesan congregations focused on education. By 1830, the Sisters were wearing an official habit for the first time.

During her years of leadership, she established and reorganized pre-revolutionary communities to become satellites of the Motherhouse. By the end of her leadership, she was responsible for establishing a number of new congregations in France and Italy as well as over 240 communities of the Lyon congregation. In 1836 at the request of Bishop Rosati of the Diocese of St. Louis in Missouri, she sent six sisters to America. She kept in constant correspondence with them. This began the expansion of numerous congregations of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the United States and Canada.

She died on 22 November 1843 in Lyon.[[]