

Marie-Hélène Mathieu, elevated to the rank of grand officer of the Legion of honour

Tuesday, 17 December 2025

Text from the Europe 1 radio programme

'Comme un lundi'

with Pierre Durieux, journalist and essayiste

So, Pierre, this morning you're going to tell us about the Legion of honour?

Yes, it was Tuesday evening at the Palace of the Legion of honour, where the grand chancellor himself presented the insignia of grand officer of the Legion of honour to Marie-Hélène Mathieu, a 96-year-old woman who has dedicated her life to people with disabilities and who, on that evening, was herself in a wheelchair due to her advanced age and fatigue. Grand officer: this is one of the highest ranks in the Order of the Legion of honour...

I think this Palace has often witnessed military, political, sporting or artistic greatness... but less likely figures like Marie-Hélène: what do you think? A special needs teacher! Decorating Marie-Hélène Mathieu is a way of decorating the people with disabilities she works with, but also all those who care for them: parents, carers, social workers... in a way, it was the nation's recognition of all those who commit themselves, on a daily basis, to doing good, without making a fuss.

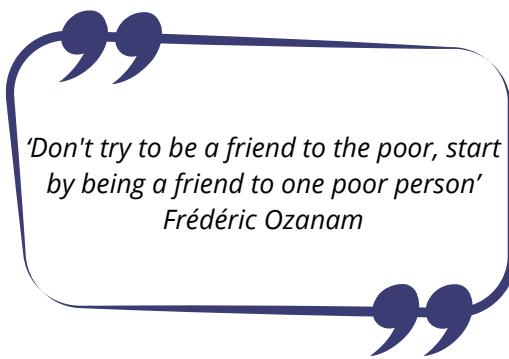


*Marie-Hélène Mathieu,
at the Palace of the Legion of honour*

● **But I imagine this woman wasn't chosen by chance?**

No, indeed! Her work is ultimately considerable: the creation of the OCH (foundation the Christian Office for People with Disabilities), then Faith and Light, which has spread to more than 80 countries on 5 continents, and then her countless interventions to help create so many movements and associations which - even today - help people with disabilities and their families: Relais Lumière Espérance, Simon de Cyrène, Ombres et Lumière (Shadows and Light), À Bras Ouverts... etc.

How can we explain such a fruitful and luminous life? At the origin of all these commitments was her encounter with Alice, a young girl with disabilities who was mistreated, perhaps even harassed, at her school. Marie-Hélène recounts how, as a teenager, she was touched by this young girl's suffering! This first encounter led to a lifetime of commitment. It is, in essence, an illustration of Frédéric Ozanam's invitation: 'Don't try to be a friend to the poor, start by being a friend to one poor person,' and then everything can change!



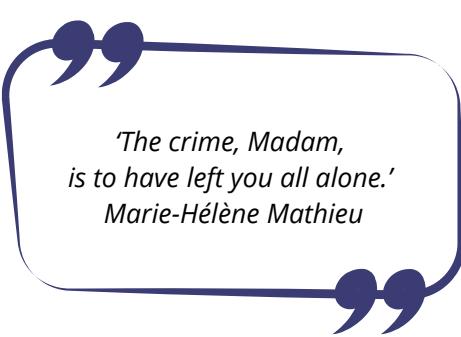
'Don't try to be a friend to the poor, start by being a friend to one poor person'

Frédéric Ozanam

● **So one encounter can change a life?**

Yes, that is the main lesson to be learned from this story. The title of her first book says it all: 'Better to light a lamp than curse the darkness!' In our debates on end-of-life care and the so-called right to die with dignity, Marie-Hélène Mathieu's struggle has been to help people live with dignity, in a little more light, a little more friendship.

To a mother who once asked her if it wasn't a crime to let children live 'like that', she replied, 'The crime, Madam, is to have left you all alone.' A hand that is accompanied never asks to die. That is 'the light of an encounter'! This light deserved a little grandeur, a little honour, a little recognition, at last! Thank you!



*'The crime, Madam,
is to have left you all alone.'*

Marie-Hélène Mathieu