

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.

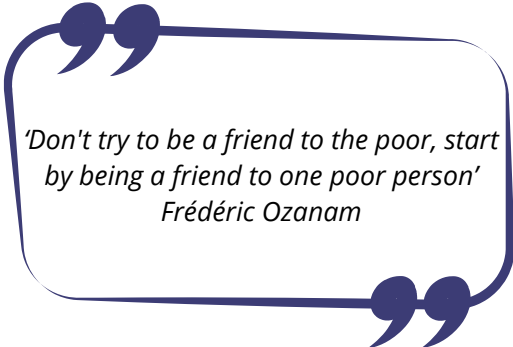


**Marie-Hélène Mathieu,
at the Palace of the Legion of honour**

● 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!

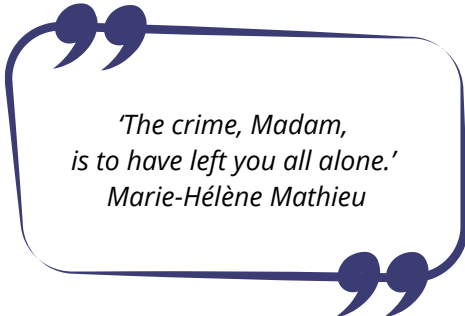


*'Don't try to be a friend to the poor, start
by being a friend to one poor person'*
Frédéric Ozanam

● 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