

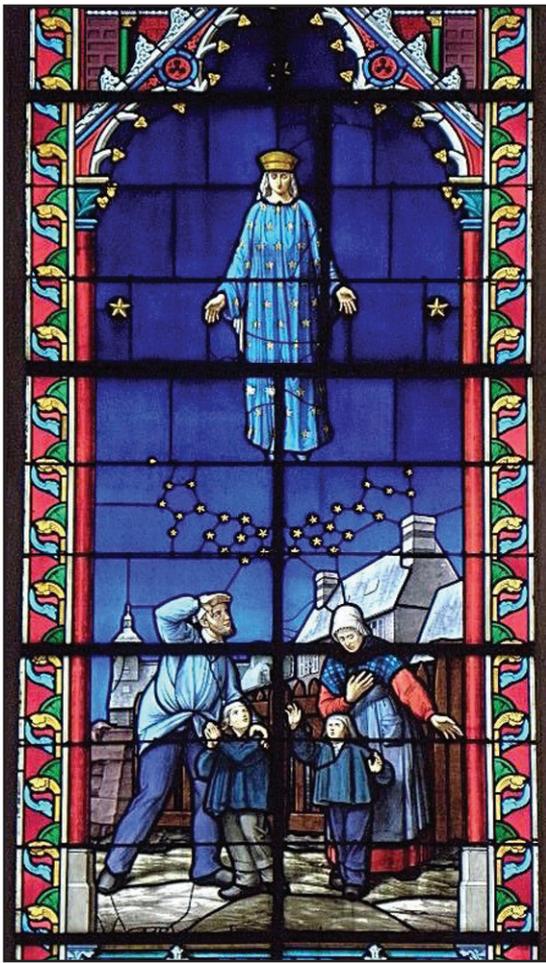
*But pray, my children.
God will answer you very soon.
My Son lets himself be touched.*

Our Lady brings hope in troubled times

As Little Sisters we trust unconditionally in God's loving Providence. We believe that if we remain faithful to the ideal of our vocation, God will never abandon us. Sometimes he does seem to test us a bit, however — perhaps to see how strong our faith is, or to remind us of our need for him — and then he intervenes with just what is needed at the last minute, as he did for his disciples in the midst of a storm, before our little boat capsizes and sinks.

God often intervenes in this “last minute” fashion in historical events as well. The apparition of Our Lady of Pontmain in France was one of these miraculous “just in the nick of time” occasions. Although Our Lady of Pontmain remains less well-known than Lourdes or Fatima, she is especially dear to our Congregation. Perhaps it is because the apparition took place just sixty-two miles from our motherhouse in Brittany, or that it occurred during the lifetime of our foundress, Saint Jeanne Jugan. Or maybe it is because Our Lady of Pontmain was God's chosen instrument in one of his truly dramatic “last minute” interventions, one that helped save our Homes in the region from the ravages of war.

Our Lady's visitation in this obscure little village took place on the evening of January 17, 1871; next year will mark its 150th anniversary. Earlier this year Mother General María invited our Congregation to prepare for this sesquicentennial in a meaningful way by creating a chain of prayer uniting our communities around the world. From March 25, 2020 until January 17, 2021, each community has been assigned a date on the calendar on



which to hold a day of prayer and Eucharistic adoration to pray for vocations to our religious family and for the perseverance of all Little Sisters, through the intercession of Our Lady of Pontmain. We have invited our Residents, Jeanne Jugan Associates and all who collaborate with us to join us in these days of prayer.

In Pontmain “Mary gave the children a message which is still very relevant,” Mother María wrote to us in early February, quoting Our Lady’s words. “But pray, my children. God will answer you very soon. My

Son lets himself be touched.’ ... Her words encourage us today to pray at all times with unshakeable confidence, totally convinced by what Mary tells us: ‘My Son lets himself be touched.’”

Our Lady of Pontmain is also known as Our Lady of Hope. Drawing from the words of Pope Francis on this year’s World Day for Consecrated Life, Mother General emphasized this virtue. “The gaze of consecrated men and women can only be one of hope. Knowing how to hope. Looking around, it is easy to lose hope: things that don’t work, the decline in vocations... There is always the temptation to have a worldly gaze, one devoid of hope. But let us look to the Gospel and see Simeon and Anna: they were elderly, alone, yet they had not lost hope, because they

remained in communion with the Lord. Anna ‘did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day’ (v. 37). Here is the secret: never to alienate oneself from the Lord, who is the source of hope. We become blind if we do not look to the Lord every day, if we do not adore him.”

Little could Pope Francis or Mother María have known how valuable these words would become in the face of the pandemic that invaded our lives several weeks later. “Looking around, it is easy to lose hope,” the Pope said on February 1st. No doubt we have all known moments of fear and anxiety during these past months — moments when we wondered if God really hears our prayers, and when or if he will intervene to end the pandemic. In a recent general audience our Holy Father again emphasized the virtue of hope, “In the face of the pandemic and its social consequences, many risk losing hope. In this time of uncertainty and anguish, I invite everyone to welcome the gift of hope that comes from Christ. It is he who helps us navigate the tumultuous waters of sickness, death and injustice, which do not have the last word over our final destination.”

In these anxious times the words of Our Lady of Pontmain also take on greater relevance: “But pray, my children. God will answer you very soon. My Son lets himself be touched.” Let’s take a look at how this apparition changed the course of history, and how it can help us to see our current situation in a new light.

An invisible Madonna barring the way

From a historical perspective the apparition at Pontmain will forever be linked to the Franco-Prussian War. This conflict, the result of years of tension between France and Germany, began when Napoleon III declared war on Germany on July 19, 1870. A coalition of states led by Prussia, called the North German Confederation, would go on to decimate France, bringing an end to French dominance in continental Europe and solidifying a unified Germany. In addition to the war, in the early 1870s the

region was engulfed in a typhoid and smallpox epidemic.

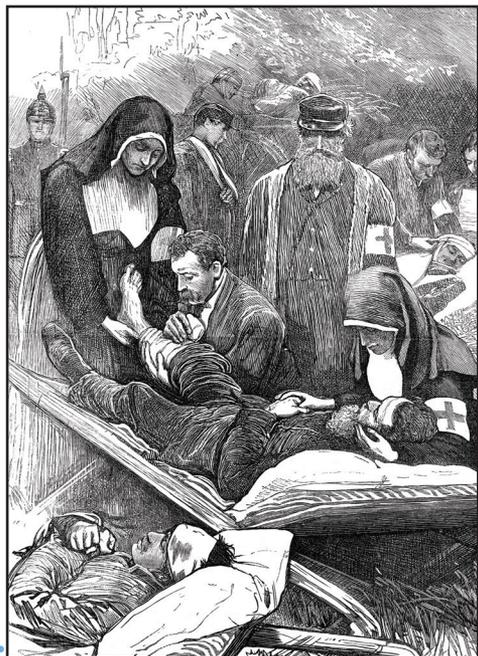
Our Lady appeared to six children in the small village of Pontmain, on the eastern edge of Brittany, for three hours on the evening of January 17, 1871.

That evening the Prussian army was poised to invade Laval, a city 28 miles away. If they succeeded in taking Laval, which was likely, they would easily gain entry to the whole region of Brittany. Not long after Mary disappeared from the sky over Pontmain, the commander of the Prussian forces, headquartered at the archbishop's palace in Le Mans, called off the invasion of Laval. He had received a mysterious report from one of his generals saying, "We cannot go further. Yonder, in the direction of Brittany, there is an invisible Madonna barring the way."

Laval, Pontmain and all of Brittany were spared! Paris, which had been occupied by the Prussians since September of 1870, soon surrendered and an armistice was signed on January 28, 1871 — less than two weeks after Our Lady promised the children of Pontmain that God would answer their prayers "very soon."



Angels of mercy tend the wounded.



The greatness of the danger and the efficacy of heavenly protection

The people of France were sorely tried during this period. Our Congregation — barely thirty years old at the time — was not spared. The map below roughly indicates the broad swath of French territory taken by Prussian forces during the war. From Strasbourg in the east to Laval in the west, the Little Sisters had established numerous houses for the care of the elderly in the occupied region, including five in Paris. From the outskirts of Laval, where they sat on January 17th, Prussian forces were less than a hundred miles from our motherhouse in St. Pern and





The villagers of Pontmain who witnessed Our Lady's apparition on January 17, 1871.

the first foundations in St. Servan, Rennes and Dinan — the very cradle of the Congregation. It was an unsettling time to say the least. Saint Jeanne Jugan often led the young novices with whom she passed her days in praying for peace.

Wanting to do their part in wartime, the Little Sisters decided to establish a small “ambulance” in each of their houses in the invaded territories to help care for the wounded and sick from both sides. In that era the term “ambulance” was used to denote something akin to a combat support hospital; they were more than the medical transport vehicles we know today. The government supported those willing to help the war effort in this way. Several thousand soldiers were thus treated at our Homes in France over a period of about six months. One house welcomed 230 wounded combatants, and another received 163 fever-stricken and wounded men, twenty-three of whom died. The Little Sisters also sent convoys of convalescent soldiers to our houses in the south of France so that those recuperating could benefit from a warmer climate and a more peaceful atmosphere.

Conditions in Paris were especially difficult. Because the Prussians refused to allow the passage of food shipments into

the city, the civilian population suffered from food shortages so severe that Parisians began to rely on pets and zoo animals for meat. The Little Sisters, however, were permitted to go out in their religious habits — a favor no other religious community was afforded at that time — to collect alms for their poor. What heroic courage they must have summoned from deep within as they ventured out on war-ravaged streets on their collecting rounds!

Although there were no casualties among the Little Sisters or elderly in Strasbourg, our Home there was seriously damaged by bombs during the siege of the city in September of 1870. An early historian of the Congregation noted that “they felt at the same time the greatness of the danger and the efficacy of heavenly protection.” He also observed that “human endurance has its limits.” In the six months following the Prussian victory in Strasbourg, six Little Sisters fell ill and forty-six Residents died.

Our historian’s observations resonate with our current expe-

periences as we continue to wind our way along the uncharted paths of the pandemic. We too simultaneously experience the greatness of the danger and the efficacy of heavenly protection.

In these tough times can we not all commiserate with the villagers of Pontmain during that winter of 1871? Our Lady was silent when



The statue of Our Lady in front of the basilica that bears her name in Pontmain’s village square. The basilica was built in 1900.

she appeared in the sky on the evening of January 17th, and only the children could see her — but she made her message clear as a large white banner unfurled itself at her feet. The words appeared slowly, beginning with a surprising phrase: “But pray.” The adults standing nearby insisted that the children must surely be mistaken — after all, it is grammatically incorrect to start a sentence with the word “but!”

Perhaps Our Lady began with the word “but” because her first words that evening were a response to a plea already sent heavenward. Surely she was eavesdropping when the villagers spoke to their holy pastor earlier that week — for with almost forty men from the village engaged in the fighting and the enemy drawing dangerously near, they had begun to doubt that God was listening to their prayers and had turned to Father Michel Guérin for courage. Mary’s message that evening was a mother’s loving response to her discouraged children, and there is no better response to our current anxieties. “But pray, my children. God will answer you very soon. My Son lets himself be touched!” ♡