



Saint Jeanne Jugan comes alive in stone

Brittany, the rugged northwest corner of France and the birthplace of our Congregation, is a land of saints and legends that most of us have never heard of. The region's first recorded inhabitants were drawn from five Celtic tribes. The Romans invaded in 56 B.C. and called the area *Amorica*, a Romanization of the Celtic words for "sea side."

The Romans brought their own saints to the region, beginning with St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary. An ancient legend claims that Anne was an Armorican (Breton) woman of noble birth who journeyed to Judea, where she gave birth to her daughter Mary, the mother of Jesus. Other Breton saints from this era also go back to the earliest days of the Church.

In the fifth and sixth centuries British Celts fleeing their homeland due to the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain settled in the area. Missionaries from Wales, Ireland and Cornwall also came. From their hermitages they converted the region solidly to Christianity and gave it its modern name, Brittany.





Jeanne Jugan in the making: The team of sculptors works on the statue, with a smaller model (foreground) as their guide.

Left: Mother Assistante Benoîte admires sculptor Margot Lasalle's work on the begging basket and loaves of bread.





Little by little, with the help of power tools, Jeanne Jugan emerges from the huge granite block. The face and hands are carved out of contrasting colors of granite. Jeanne Jugan is depicted with eyes closed to represent her spirit of prayerfulness.



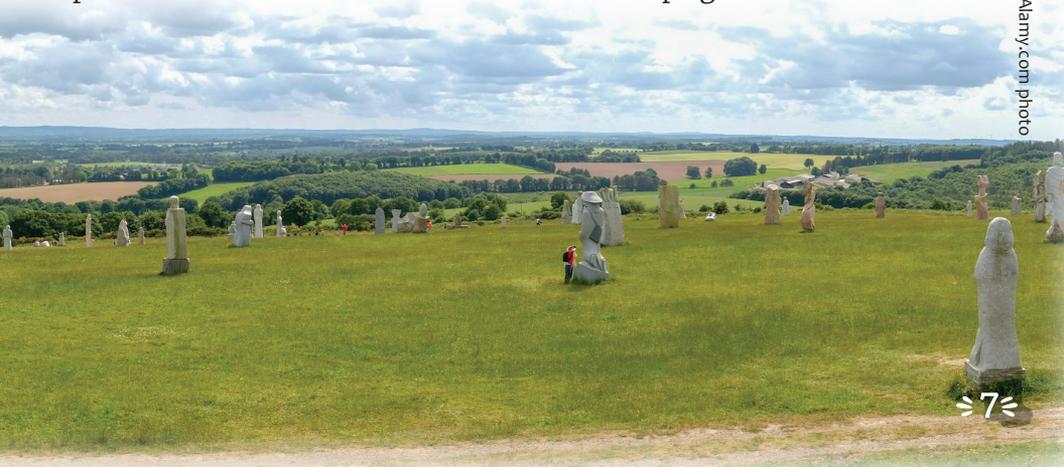


The seven ancient dioceses of Brittany were established by the missionary monks, who are known as the “seven founding saints.” Corentin, Tugdual, Paterne, Samson, Pol, Malo and Briec were the first of hundreds of Breton saints, many of whom were never officially canonized and the majority of whom remain largely unknown to the wider Church. However, today these primitive Breton saints tower over the region from an impressive site known as the Valley of the Saints.

La Vallée des Saints, as it is called in French, is located in Carnoët, a small village of about 700 inhabitants located in central Brittany. Conceived in 2008 as a cultural and historic project, the Valley saw the installation of the first group of enormous granite statues in 2010. The hundredth statue was inaugurated in 2018. The site’s creators envision the installation of 1,000 statues over the next fifty years!

Organizers hope that the Valley of the Saints will become “the face of the Breton soul,” a place of testimony for those who want to draw from the source of spirituality, myths, dreams, and history. In fact, the ideal of rootedness in the Breton soil is one of the Valley’s primary themes — for those who have faith in the future and wish to understand it, it is necessary to be rooted in the past, say site organizers. This is a concept with which Pope Francis heartily agrees!

On August 28, Saint Jeanne Jugan took her place among the 155 statues already erected in the Valley of the Saints. The idea of creating a statue of our foundress for the site originated in her home parish of Cancale. Parishioners launched a campaign to raise the nec-



essary funds, and then a couple from Ille-et-Vilaine, Chantal and Pascal Méré, saw the project through to its completion. Pascal Méré had served for twenty years as president of a regional association dedicated to home care services in Brittany and through his work had become well acquainted with our Congregation and our holy foundress.

Through their enthusiastic efforts, Méré and his wife wished “to make the message of Jeanne Jugan ‘quasi-eternal.’” At their suggestion, the statue was placed near the entrance of the Valley of the Saints to make it as easy as possible for older persons to reach it.

The body of the statue was hewn from a single block of blue-gray granite weighing 23 tons and reaching five meters in height. The finished piece measures just over three meters and weighs 10 tons. The face, hands and loaves of bread were sculpted from pink granite. Jeanne Jugan is seated with a cross behind her, reminiscent of the roadside crucifixes



This page, top: Sculptor Patrice Le Guen poses with the finished work before the statue is placed on its pedestal.

Jeanne Jugan visited her hometown of Cancale and the motherhouse before finally arriving in the Valley of the Saints. Here she is surrounded by Little Sisters at the motherhouse.

Close-ups of a hand with bread and the little frog destined to sit at Jeanne’s feet show the details of the statue.

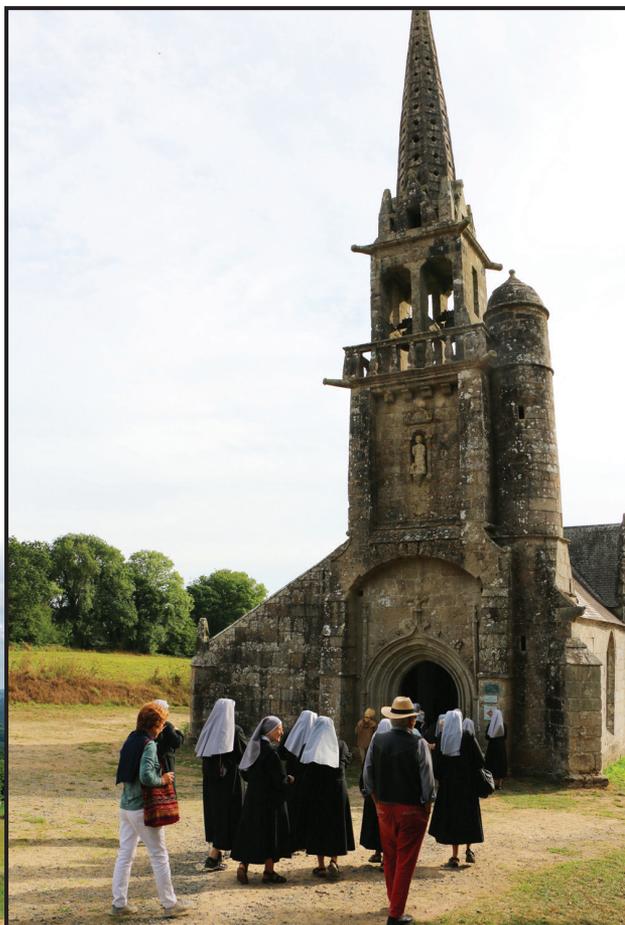




commonly seen throughout the Breton countryside. Jeanne is holding two bits of bread, with a basket full of loaves to her right. To the left of her feet sits a small frog.

“This statue communicates several messages,” explains Mother Assistant Benoîte, who followed the project on behalf of Mother General. “That of poverty with the collection basket and the loaves ... That of prayer with her hands in an attitude of offering, the cross behind





and the frog evoking the words of Jeanne Jugan: ‘When you pray, remain before the good God like a little frog. Be very little, very humble!’”

Prior to the blessing of the statue, Mass

Top left: Benefactors Chantal and Pascal Méré sit on either side of Mother General during the Mass in the chapel of St. Gildas while young people sit on the floor.

Top right: Everyone makes their way up the hill after Mass.



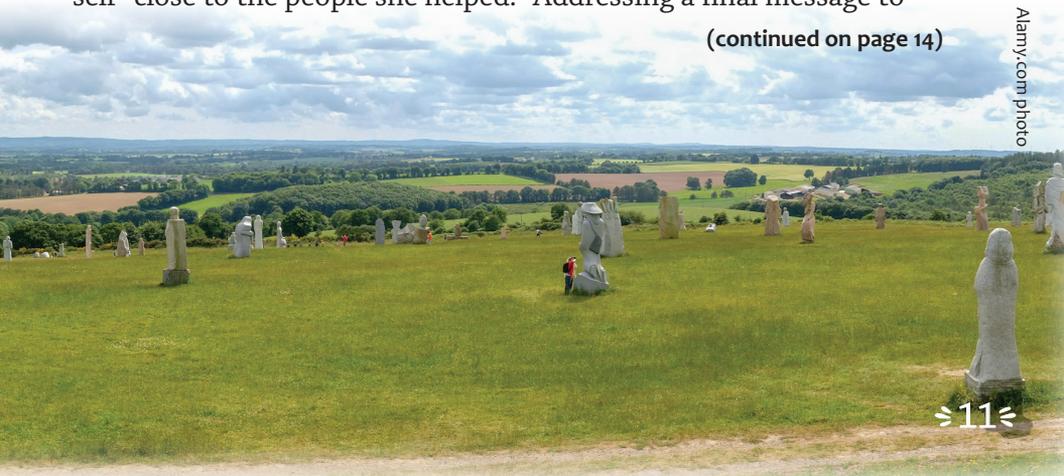


was celebrated in the chapel of Saint Gildas, a 16th century church that stands alone in the middle of the countryside adjacent to the hill where the statues stand. Although the chapel can accommodate 300 people, Jeanne Jugan had drawn so many people to this remote

spot that many had to follow Mass from outside. The celebration was presided by Bishop Denis Moutel, of the diocese of Saint-Brieuc and Tréguier, where the Valley of the Saints Saints is located, and was concelebrated by Archbishop Pierre d'Ornellas and several priests, including the parish priests of Cancale and Bécherel.

In his introductory remarks, Bishop Moutel thanked the artists “for having engraved in stone this beautiful figure” who “knew how to give without reserve” throughout her whole life. In his homily, he called on the assembly to pray to Saint Jeanne Jugan, who heard and responded to “the pressing invitation of Jesus: go and take the lowest place (Lk 14:10).” In following Jesus, he said, “It is not a question of being the best or the least, but of recognizing ourselves as fragile and poor. Jesus looks at us all with hope.” Jeanne Jugan made herself “close to the people she helped.” Addressing a final message to

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Assisted by Bishop Denis Moutel, Archbishop Pierre d'Ornellas blesses the statue of Saint Jeanne Jugan. She is surrounded by flags representing the countries where the Congregation serves elderly persons in need.



the assembly, he said, “Do not renounce holiness in the image of Jeanne Jugan and all the Breton saints.”

After Mass everyone climbed up a narrow path



leading to the giant statues overlooking the valley. Archbishop Pierre d’Orenellas of the archdiocese of Rennes blessed the statue before 130 Little Sisters and a large gathering of friends, reflecting on what Jeanne Jugan teaches us through this statue: “Saint Jeanne, you are seated exactly as Jesus was to teach us. You teach us about the poverty of the poor, about humility that

Top: Mother General María poses with the bishops, sculptors, Mme and Mr Méré and local dignitaries.

Left : Local musicians enhance the festivities.



has no limits. You teach us about wisdom and the presence of God.”

“You teach us about the pure heart that sees God in the poorest, suffering faces,” he continued. “And if you are seated, you are seated like Jesus who was tired at Jacob’s well. You experience the fatigue of the poor. You sit and beg. Dear Jeanne, seeing you in this statue, we discover that you loved Jesus, gentle and humble of heart, who became poor to join us in our poverty and enrich us. Jeanne, with eyes closed, we discover that you are consoled and that you console others with gentleness and tenderness.”

“By learning the simplest, most ordinary gestures of caring, you console hearts, souls and minds, preparing each person for the great encounter with God. Dear Jeanne, thank you for teaching us about the Beatitudes and for being here among us. Jeanne, we love you.”

In her remarks following the blessing ceremony, Mother General María also noted Jeanne Jugan’s posture in the statue. “Usually Jeanne is depicted standing,” she mused, “walking, always active. But the sculptor was inspired to represent her seated, offering us two pieces of bread. In our agitated world I believe this is an invitation for each of us to sit down and take the time to welcome one another, and to really listen to each other. We need to learn this art of listening and of caring, sharing the bread of our friendship and our love.”

As she so often does, Mother General concluded by turning our attention to the elderly. “It is good to give this gift to the elderly who may suffer from loneliness, but for all of us as well. And Jeanne will remain here forever inviting us to grow in listening and kindness toward all.” ♡

