

Serenity

no. 162

Little Sisters of the Poor

April 2014



It is wonderful to be able to give oneself to the very end for the sake of the Kingdom of God!

– Saint John Paul II



Our Mission

Continuing the work of Saint Jeanne Jugan, our MISSION is to offer the neediest elderly of every race and religion a home where they will be welcomed as Christ, cared for as family and accompanied with dignity until God calls them to himself.

Cover photo: Saint John Paul II; photo, *L'Osservatore Romano*, used with permission.

Back inside cover: *Held in the love of the Three Divine Persons, we can intercede for others. A person who loves God brings close to God all the people she carries in her heart*, by Elizabeth Wang.

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friend of the poor

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The smell of the sheep and two saintly Popes

AS POPE FRANCIS BEGINS HIS SECOND YEAR IN OFFICE, a title originally used by Pope Saint Gregory I in the sixth century seems especially à propos: “servant of the servants of God.” Our Holy Father has touched the hearts of millions by his humble, simple way of reaching out to the poorest and most marginalized. At the same time, he has said that pastors and evangelizers must roll up their sleeves and take on “the smell of the sheep.” What, precisely, does this expression mean? Our foundress, Saint Jeanne Jugan, helps us to understand the significance of these words.

As a young girl Saint Jeanne worked as a shepherdess to help support her family — but this is not exactly what the Pope meant by taking on the smell of the sheep! What he is saying is that those who hope to evangelize — to touch the hearts of others with the good news of Jesus Christ — must be willing to get involved in people’s daily lives, to meet them where they are and to serve them with the humble attitude of Jesus — “to touch the suffering flesh of Christ in others” (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 24). Jeanne Jugan did precisely this in her mission of hospitality to the needy elderly of her time.

Jeanne didn’t just sit at home and wait for the poor to come knocking at her door (although many did just this). As a lay woman, she first began serving the poor by going out among them to care for the sick and elderly wherever she found them in her local community. Then on a cold winter night in 1839, she was inspired to open her home and her heart to a blind, infirm old woman who had no one to care for her.

As more needy elderly persons were welcomed into her home



Jeanne found herself faced with the predicament of how to provide for them. Humbling herself, she decided to go out begging for her old people, many of whom had been beggars themselves. Jeanne accepted to be one of the poor, rather than merely serving them. She touched the suffering flesh of Christ and took on the smell of the sheep.

Saint Jeanne Jugan personally realized these words of Pope Francis: “An evangelizing community is supportive, standing by people at every step of the

way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be.” Our two newly canonized Popes, John XXIII and John Paul II, to whom this issue of *Serenity* is dedicated, also show us how to meet people where they are and to stand by them no matter how long or difficult the journey.

Angelo Guiseppe Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, was born into a family of sharecroppers in the small Italian village of Sotto il Monte. A biographer described his childhood as “beset by poverty but overflowing in family love and devotion.” Ordained in 1904, Father Roncalli no doubt knew how to take on the smell of the sheep. As the Pope’s emissary in Bulgaria during a very difficult time, he proved that he was willing to stand by his people no matter what. Following an earthquake in that nation in 1928, Roncalli rushed to the stricken towns and villages to see how he could help the homeless thousands. “Day after day,” his biographer recounts, “the round, black-clad figure of the Catholic archbishop was seen moving among the refugees, directing the distribution of bread and blankets.... Drawn by the suffering, torn by it, he slept in emergency

tents among the refugees, comforting them with his presence when he had nothing else to offer.”

Thirty years later, on the day he was elected to the See of St Peter, this humble servant of God wrote in his journal, quite simply, “Today they made me pope.” In his first homily as Pope, John XXIII revealed just what he hoped to be: “There are those who expect the pontiff to be a man of state, a diplomat, an organizer, or one whose mind is attuned to every form of modern knowledge... The fact is that the new pope, through the happenings of life, is like the son of Jacob, who, meeting with his brothers, showed the tenderness of his heart, and, bursting into tears, said, ‘I am Joseph, your brother.’ The new pope, let us repeat, holds in his mind’s eye the splendid image drawn by Saint John, the image of the Good Shepherd.”

Like Angelo Roncalli, Karol Józef Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II, was born into modest means. Orphaned before reaching adulthood, during World War II he secretly pursued his vocation to the priesthood while working among laborers in a stone quarry. Later as a priest and bishop in Communist-era Poland, Karol Wojtyła courageously stood up for and among his flock, supporting the Polish people in their struggles for dignity and religious freedom.

On the first official day of his pontificate in 1978, John Paul II, like John XXIII, declared himself a servant: “The new Successor of Peter in the See of Rome, today makes a fervent, humble and trusting prayer: Christ, make me become and remain the servant of your unique power, the servant of your sweet power, the servant of your power that knows no eventide. Make me be a servant. Indeed, the servant of your servants.” Throughout his long pontificate John Paul advocated for human dignity and the preferential option for the poor; it is impossible to count the peoples and causes he championed or the number of countries he visited — always lowering himself to kiss the ground and immersing himself in diverse crowds and cultures — taking on the smell of the sheep wherever he went.

In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, Saint John Paul captured the essence of the missionary spirituality: “The missionary is urged



on by ‘zeal for souls,’ a zeal inspired by Christ’s own charity, which takes the form of concern, tenderness, compassion, openness, availability and interest in people’s problems. Jesus’ love is very deep: he who ‘knew what was in man’ (Jn 2:25) loved everyone by offering them redemption and suffered when it was rejected.”

“The missionary is a person of charity,” he continued. “In order to proclaim to all his brothers and sisters that they are loved by God and are capable of loving, he must show love toward all, giving his life for his neighbor. The missionary is the ‘universal brother,’ bearing in himself the Church’s spirit, her openness to and interest in all peoples and individuals, especially the least and poorest of his brethren. As such, he overcomes barriers and divisions of race, cast or ideology. He is a sign of God’s love in the world — a love without exclusion or partiality.”

As Pope Francis continues to beckon the Church toward greater missionary zeal and authentic outreach to the poor, he can have no better intercessors than our newly canonized saints, “Good” Pope John XXIII and John Paul “the Great.” Together with our humble foundress, Saint Jeanne Jugan, may they inspire us to roll up our sleeves and commit our best energies to the new evangelization, taking on the smell of the sheep! [↓](#)

John Paul II's last encyclical

THROUGHOUT HIS LONG AND FRUITFUL PONTIFICATE, Saint John Paul II often wrote and spoke about the Christian meaning of suffering — but he also walked the walk. None of his followers will ever forget the example of this beloved Pope during his final months, as he lived out in his own flesh the profound spirituality of suffering he had so eloquently written about in his younger years. An insight shared with a friend gives us a glimpse into how John Paul II perceived the last period of his life: “I have written many encyclicals and many apostolic letters,” he said, “but I realize that it is only with my suffering that I can best help mankind. Think of the value of pain, suffered and offered with love....” Over the years we Little Sisters of the Poor had read and studied Pope John Paul’s many encyclicals and other writings, but ultimately we were most touched by this last, lived encyclical of our new saint.

In this article we piece together quotes and anecdotes gleaned from several books written after Pope John Paul II’s death, which enable us to appreciate his greatness of soul in the face of old age and suffering. They include: *Let me go to the Father’s house: John Paul II’s Strength in Weakness*, by Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, his longtime personal secretary; *Why He Is a Saint: The Life and Faith of Pope John Paul II and the Case for Canonization*, by Rev. Slawomir Oder; and *The End and The Beginning: Pope John Paul II—The Victory of Freedom, The Last Years, The Legacy*, by George Weigel. Thanks to the stories related in these books, we can trace John Paul II’s final years as he journeyed from this life to eternal life in the Father’s house. His example offers great hope to the elderly, sick and disabled — not because of

his suffering in and of itself, but because of the way he embraced it as a participation in the redemptive mission of Christ.

John Paul II included the sick and suffering in his mission from the very first days of his pontificate, addressing them in his first *Urbi et Orbi* message the day after his election: “The unworthy successor of Peter, who proposes to scrutinize the unfathomable riches of Christ, is in great need of your help, your prayers and your sacrifices, and this I most humbly beg of you.” It wasn’t long before he experienced suffering on a very personal level through the attempt on his life in Saint Peter’s Square on May 13, 1981. As he was released from the hospital that summer, he thanked God for saving his life and for the grace of having belonged, during his long hospitalization, to “the community of the sick suffering ... who constitute, in a certain sense, a special segment of the Church, of the Mystical Body of Christ.”

In 1984, Pope John Paul wrote an apostolic letter on the Christian meaning of human suffering (*Salvifici Doloris*), in which he shared the stunning conviction that suffering is present in the world to unleash love, “that unselfish gift of one’s ‘I’” on behalf of those who suffer. He elaborated, “Suffering is present in the world in order to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbor, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a ‘civilization of love.’” This letter was written the same year that John Paul concluded the series of talks that would later become known as the theology of the body. The idea of the gift of one’s “I” on behalf of those who suffer reflects his teaching on this theme. It would also prove to be prophetic in light of the manner in which John Paul allowed others to witness and help carry the burden of his sufferings during his old age.

Pope John Paul instituted the annual World Day of the Sick in 1992; it has been celebrated every year since then on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. In July of that year he underwent surgery for an abdominal tumor, confiding to a friend beforehand, “The Church needs suffering.” On another occasion he added, “What are my sufferings compared with the sufferings of Jesus?”

The Pope's physical decline became more evident in 1993 when he fell and broke his shoulder. Then in 1994 he broke his hip in a fall, necessitating the postponement of a scheduled trip to the United States. Rev. Oder wrote of this moment, "John Paul II considered with lucid self-awareness the progressive deterioration of his health: 'Do you think that I can't see myself, and the shape I'm in, on television?,'" he reflected. While at first it was difficult for him to accept his physical condition, soon after he could be seen playfully swinging his cane before millions of young people gathered for World Youth Day in Manila.



In 1995 Pope John Paul published his landmark encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*). The document includes definitive teaching on abortion and euthanasia, but it also articulates a spiritual approach to life and death based on communion with God and neighbor. The document is worth quoting at some length:

In old age, how should one face the inevitable decline of life? How should one act in the face of death? The believer knows that his life is in the hands of God: "You, O Lord, hold my lot" (cf. Ps 16:5), and he accepts from God the need to die: "This is the decree from the Lord for all flesh, and how can you reject the good pleasure of the Most High?" (Sir 41:3-4). Man is not the master of life, nor is he the master of death. In life and in death, he has to entrust himself completely to the "good pleasure of the Most High", to his loving plan.

In moments of sickness too, man is called to have the same trust in the Lord and to renew his fundamental faith in the One who “heals all your diseases” (cf. Ps 103:3). When every hope of good health seems to fade before a person’s eyes — so as to make him cry out: “My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass” (Ps 102:11) — even then the believer is sustained by an unshakable faith in God’s life-giving power. Illness does not drive such a person to despair and to seek death, but makes him cry out in hope: “I kept my faith, even when I said, I am greatly afflicted” “ (Ps 116:10); “O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. (Ps 30:2).

He also proposed an alternative to euthanasia based on the spirituality of communion:

Quite different from this [euthanasia] is the way of love and true mercy, which our common humanity calls for, and upon which faith in Christ the Redeemer, who died and rose again, sheds ever new light. The request which arises from the human heart in the supreme confrontation with suffering and death, especially when faced with the temptation to give up in utter desperation, is above all a request for companionship, sympathy and support in the time of trial. It is a plea for help to keep on hoping when all human hopes fail.

This communion with God and neighbor through suffering was eloquently borne out in the life of John Paul II himself as his strength waned, as we shall see.

The Pope again underwent emergency surgery in 1996. Rev. Oder comments on this period, “John Paul II’s distinct mystical inclination found full expression in the manner in which he lived and conceived suffering as a form of expiation and as a gift of himself to mankind. This is revealed clearly by the words that he uttered following his appendectomy in 1996: ‘In these days of illness I have had the opportunity once again to understand more fully the value of

the service that the Lord has summoned me to render to the Church as priest, as bishop, as successor to Peter: it passes as well through the gift of suffering.”

The United Nations designated 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons. As a way of participating in this important event, Pope John Paul penned his *Letter to the Elderly*, in which he told seniors that as an older person himself, he was eager to converse with them. The following passages from this letter are particularly expressive of the Pope’s personal experience at that time:

The signs of human frailty which are clearly connected with advanced age become a summons to the mutual dependence and indispensable solidarity which link the different generations, inasmuch as every person needs others and draws enrichment from the gifts and charisms of all....

While the human spirit has some part in the process of bodily aging, in some way it remains ever young if it is constantly turned towards eternity....

When God permits us to suffer because of illness, loneliness or other reasons associated with old age, he always gives us the grace and strength to unite ourselves with greater love to the sacrifice of his Son and to share ever more fully in his plan of salvation. Let us be convinced of this: he is our Father, a Father rich in love and mercy!

Despite the limitations brought on by age, I continue to enjoy life. For this I thank the Lord. It is wonderful to be able to give oneself to the very end for the sake of the Kingdom of God! At the same time, I find great peace in thinking of the time when the Lord will call me: from life to life!

During the Jubilee Year in 2000, John Paul II added to his last testament, writing, “I hope He will help me to recognize how long I must continue this service to which he called me on 16 October 1978. I ask him to deign to call me to Himself whenever he wishes. ‘If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so



then... we are the Lord's' (cf. Rom 14: 8). I hope that as long as I am granted to carry out the Petrine service in the Church, God in His Mercy will grant me the necessary strength for this service." By this time many were questioning the Pope's ability to carry out his mission, but we can see that he was fully aware of his limitations and had confided himself to God, whom he called "a Father rich in love and mercy."

The following year, for the first time, a physician familiar with the Pope's condition confirmed that he was suffering from Parkinson's disease. A close collaborator added that although John Paul was suffering from difficulty speaking and hearing, as well as severe arthritis, he accepted God's will that he continue as Pope and was determined to remain in office until he died or became irrevocably mentally impaired.

Increasingly frail, John Paul II made his last trip outside Italy in August 2004, visiting the Marian shrine of Lourdes for the feast of Mary's Assumption into heaven. George Weigel describes the unforgettable scene at the grotto of Massabielle: "He was lifted to a prie-dieu for a moment of prayer, but then seemed to fall back; caught by his aides, he was then pulled into a chair, wet-eyed — whether from pain or emotion no one knew.... Cardinal Roger Etchegaray read the Pope's prayer for him, which began with a greeting to the

sick: 'I share a time of life marked by physical suffering, yet not for that reason any less fruitful in God's wondrous plan.'... At Lourdes he described himself as 'a sick man among the sick.'

In this moving description we can read the words of John Paul himself in his *Letter to the Elderly*: "At the very time when their physical energies and their level of activity are decreasing, these brothers and sisters of ours become all the more precious in the mysterious plan of Providence."

Pope John Paul II's final ascent to the Father's house began in February of 2005, when he was hospitalized for complications of the flu. On February 6 he delivered his Angelus message from his hospital bed, saying, "I continue to serve the Church and the whole of humanity, even here in the hospital among other sick persons, of whom I am thinking with affection." With great effort due to his increasing difficulty in speaking, he confided to a friend later that month, "It is all in the hands of God." Rev. Slawomir Oder commented on this moment, saying that, "He was clearly serene, at peace with the situation, and aware of his condition, because he was unquestionably suffering."

"It is all in the hands of God." These may have been among the last audible words uttered by the Pope, because on February 24 he underwent surgery for a tracheotomy to resolve an acute respiratory insufficiency, a procedure which rendered him incapable of speaking. When he realized this, John Paul wrote on a small chalkboard, "What have you done to me? Totus tuus (totally yours)." As quickly as he realized this new state of disability, the Pope confided himself to the Blessed Virgin, to whom he had already entrusted his whole life.

Quite fittingly in view of his own condition, John Paul dedicated Lent 2005 to the elderly, inviting the faithful to reflect on "the role that the elderly are called to play in society and in the Church, and... the loving welcome that should always be reserved for them." In one of his final Angelus messages, delivered from his hospital room just three days after receiving the tracheotomy, the Pope encouraged the suffering: "The penitential season of Lent that we are living helps

us to understand better the value of suffering, which in one way or another touches us all. It is in looking at Christ and following him with patient trust that we are able to understand how every human form of suffering contains a divine promise of salvation and joy. I desire that this message of comfort and hope reaches everyone, especially those who are going through difficult moments and to those who suffer in body and in spirit.”

The Pope returned to the Vatican definitively on March 13, 2005. In his Angelus message that day he thanked the media for enabling the faithful in every part of the world to feel close to him and to accompany him with their affection and prayers. These words expressed John Paul’s awareness of the deep communion that existed between himself and the faithful through his suffering. In his book, George Weigel commented on the Pope’s condition that day: “The backs of his hands were deeply discolored from the injections and intravenous lines, Archbishop Leonardo Sandri remembered, and the Pope was ‘trembling with the chill.’ Yet the physical disfigurement and weakness was, as Sandri said, ‘the Gospel of the silent mystery of his friendship with God for the salvation of the world — his silent Mass with God.’” (As Substitute for General Affairs in the Vatican Secretariat of State, Archbishop Sandri had the role of reading the Pope’s texts when he was no longer able to deliver them himself.)

Providentially, John Paul II’s final illness coincided with Holy Week and Easter of 2005. When a cardinal friend encouraged him not to strain himself during Holy Week, the Pope replied, “Jesus did not descend from the cross, why should I?” Although unable to attend the Stations of the Cross according to his longstanding custom, the Pope watched them on television, clutching a large crucifix to his breast throughout the service. In the message released for this annual event he said, “The adoration of the Cross directs us to a commitment that we cannot shirk: the mission that St Paul expressed in these words: “[In] my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church” (Col 1: 24). I also offer my sufferings so that God’s plan may be completed and



his Word spread among the peoples. I, in turn, am close to all who are tried by suffering at this time. I pray for each one of them.”

On Easter Sunday the Pope appeared at his window for the traditional *Urbi et Orbi* message, which was read by Archbishop Sambi, after which he tried to give his blessing. He was unable to speak and in obvious pain. Shaken by this event, he confided to Archbishop Stanisaw Dziwisz, his private secretary, “Maybe it would be better for me to die if I cannot carry out this mission entrusted to me ... Your will be done ... *Totus tuus*.”

On March 31 John Paul II went into septic shock, which led to the collapse of his cardiovascular system. He received Holy Communion and the Anointing of the Sick. The next day Cardinal Camillo Ruini, Vicar General of the diocese of Rome at the time, appeared before a crowd at Saint John Lateran and said, “The Pope can already see and touch the Lord.” John Paul II could still hear the crowds gathered outside his window, and at one point he struggled to convey a message to the young people praying for him, “I have sought you out. Now you have come to me. I thank you.”

Witnesses related that during his final afternoon on April 2, the Pope “repeatedly embraced with his gaze those of his closest

circle who were watching over him.” The eyes of the dying Pope rested on images of the suffering Christ and Our Lady of Czestochowa. Archbishop Dwizwicz later reflected on his mentor’s final hours: “He had always been profoundly aware that at the end of his earthly pilgrimage man is not doomed to fall into darkness, into an existential void or an abyss of nothingness, but is called rather to meet the best of fathers, who welcomes his child lovingly into his arms, giving him the fullness of life in the Most Holy Trinity... At a certain moment in the afternoon, John Paul said, ‘Let me go to the house of the Father.’”

Mass for Divine Mercy Sunday was celebrated in the Pope’s room at 8:00 p.m. on April 2, during which he again received the Anointing of the Sick, along with the Precious Blood as Viaticum. Saint John Paul II crossed the threshold of the Father’s house at 9:37 p.m. Twenty-five years earlier, he had spoken to a group of senior citizens in Munich, Germany, about life’s final moment: “Without familiarity with God there is in the last end no consolation in death. For that is exactly what God intends with death that at least in this one sublime hour of our life we allow ourselves to fall into his love without any other security than just this love of his. How could we show him our faith, our love in a more lucid manner?” How eloquently these words of John Paul II, penned so many years earlier, describe his own sentiments in that most decisive moment of his life!

In reflecting on the trajectory of John Paul II’s life and death the following words of Saint Paul to the Corinthians come to mind: “Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor 4:16–18). In paralleling his words and personal experiences, it is clear that the way in which Pope John Paul II suffered and handed over his life to God in 2005 mirrored his life-long identification with the sick and the spiritual convictions he had long articulated.

We also see that Pope John Paul's last years were marked as strongly by spiritual ascent as they were by physical decline. With each additional limitation, he grew more intent on using his sufferings as a powerful Gospel witness. Rev. Oder, postulator for the cause of canonization, refers to John Paul II's "distinct mystical inclination," saying that it found full expression in the manner in which he lived and conceived suffering as a form of expiation and as a gift of himself to humanity. Finally, Pope John Paul II lived his sufferings as a grace of communion and solidarity, offering his body as a place of universal communion — the springboard for a cycle of compassion through which love was unleashed in prayer and fraternal support.

In his funeral homily on April 8, 2005, John Paul's eventual successor, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, evoked the painful memory of the Pope's final days. "We can be sure," he concluded, "that our beloved Pope is standing today at the window of the Father's house, that he sees us and blesses us." Just as he always identified with the sick and suffering during his earthly life, we can be sure that he will forever be standing at the window of the Father's house, obtaining graces of courage and hope for all those who suffer, embracing and blessing them. Pope Saint John Paul the Great, pray for us! [⬇](#)



“Every day I witness with my own eyes the edifying spectacle of the survival of the spirit of simplicity, humility and inexhaustible and trusting generosity that the Little Sisters still offer today in Constantinople... It is as though certain traits of their blessed Mother Foundress shine in each one of them ... Spontaneously and wholeheartedly, I express the desire that this new light of life and of Christian perfection be removed from under the bushel and placed up high so that all the world may see it and give glory to our Heavenly Father....”

– Archbishop Angelo Roncalli,
1939

Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, serving dinner at the Little Sisters of the Poor in Paris during his tenure as apostolic nuncio to France, March 19, 1948. Background: our motherhouse, La Tour Saint Joseph; the steeple of the chapel is surmounted by a large statue of our patron, Saint Joseph.

John XXIII, friend of Saint Joseph, friend of the poor

POPE SAINT JOHN XXIII knew and loved our Congregation of Little Sisters of the Poor. As papal nuncio he had numerous contacts with our homes, first in Istanbul and then in Paris. During a visit to Brittany in 1947 he visited the apartment in Saint Servan where Saint Jeanne Jugan founded the Congregation, and during a Marian Congress in Rennes in 1950 he stayed at our motherhouse. He loved to recount these experiences during the annual audiences accorded to our Mother General when he was pope. The last of these was March 9, 1962. Another audience planned for May 22 of that year had to be canceled due to the Holy Father's failing health. However, Mother General Genevieve de St. Chantal had the consolation of seeing John XXIII one more time as he lay dying in his private apartment.

During his visit to La Tour in October of 1950, Pope John XXIII, then the nuncio to France, spoke to a gathering of Little Sisters, sharing with them his great love for Saint Joseph. His words on that day, as recorded by those present and translated from French, follow.

"I have been familiar with your Congregation since 1935. I find La Tour to be everything I had heard about and more. La Tour Saint Joseph is like the Vatican of the Congregation!

"You told me that a nuncio has never visited here before and that makes me happy. In the past, the nuncios stayed in their nunciatures like kings in their palaces, or like hermits. Now it is different — we must go here and there. In the beginning, the Holy Father felt that this nuncio was out too much, always en route for somewhere. But everywhere I went, I was able to tell him that I found the foot-

prints of my predecessors, who had been there before. Here, I find no trace of them!

“Recently, the Africans told the Holy Father, “The nuncio? But he belongs to us as well. He must come to see us!” And the Holy Father told me, “The Africans are asking for you; they’re going to invite you to come to them and you must go!”

“I thank Saint Joseph for the grace of going to Saint Servan, where I saw the humble home where your Congregation was established. I climbed up into the Mansarde (the second floor apartment where, in 1839, Saint Jeanne Jugan welcomed the first elderly woman), and for someone of my size, that was not easy! But there I was able to observe how the works of God are conceived.

“I love Saint Joseph so much that I cannot begin or end my day without confiding my first word and my last thought to him. Oh, I also love the Blessed Virgin and her Child, but — what do you expect? — we are poor men, happy to grasp the hand of whoever extends himself to us to help us!

“When I was baptized, the parish priest asked what my name would be. My godfather responded — Angelo Joseph. When my father announced the good news of my birth in the village, he was asked my name. He said he didn’t know if it was Angelo Joseph or Joseph Angelo, so they wrote down Joseph. In my family they called me Angelo — or Angelino — but when I went in the military they called me Joseph!

“When in his Providence God made me a bishop, I didn’t want to offend my guardian angel, so I called myself Angelo Joseph. I really wanted to be consecrated bishop on the feast of Saint Joseph. Cardinal Gasparri asked me why I chose that day. “Because Saint Joseph is my protector,” I said. “and because I believe Saint Joseph is the patron of diplomats.”

“Patron of diplomats?” he asked me, ‘How so?’

“Well, I think that diplomats, like Saint Joseph, must make our Lord known and hide themselves,’ I responded. The Cardinal’s eyes were then wide open! ... We must make the Lord known, but



Archbishop Roncalli visiting our Little Sisters in Annaba, Algeria, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Basilica of St. Augustine, March 1950.

sometimes we have to hide him. It's safer that way. We can't put him under lock and key, but sometimes it is better that he not be seen for a time so that we can prepare a better reception for him. Like Saint Joseph, we have to know how to keep silent ... to measure our words. We must know how to work without considering the dignity of the task, to savor what is sweet and gently swallow that which is bitter.

"To obey even when we don't understand... like Saint Joseph when he had to flee [to Egypt] with his wife and child. It's like this — We're on the road and someone tells us, "Walk! Go this way!" We don't understand why, so we must abandon ourselves to Divine Providence.

"Saint Joseph has been my special patron my whole life, and I hope at the moment of my death as well. I hope that he will be the first to reach out his hand to me.

"The Little Sisters of the Poor seek out the poorest in order to offer them relief. This is our mission — to announce the good news to the poor, to bring this kindness to the depths of their souls and to help them, through our charity, to be reconciled with our Lord.

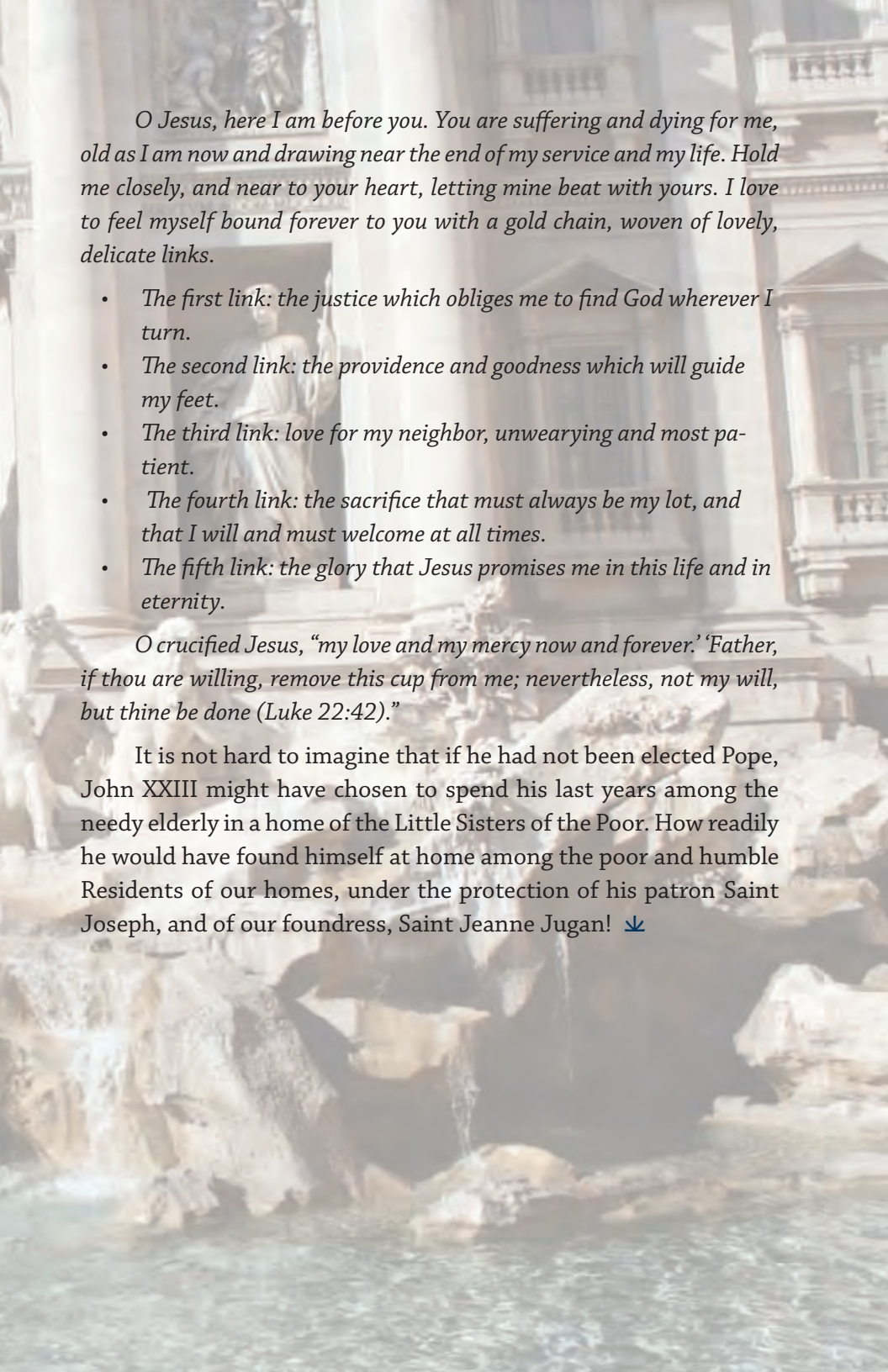


Mother General Geneviève de Ste. Chantal attends her last audience with John XXIII March 9, 1962.

“I want you to know how much joy I experience in my heart being with you ... Now I am even more united to your Congregation. I don’t know how many more years the Lord will give me on this earth, but wherever I go, I’ll take the affection and the esteem of the Little Sisters with me....”

During that friendly encounter with the Little Sisters in October 1950, Archbishop Roncalli wondered aloud how much more time he had to live. Little did he know that eight years later, as an old man of 77, he would embark on the greatest adventure of his life, and take the Church along with him! Our superior general continued to have contact with Good Pope John until shortly before his death. At their last encounter, on March 9, 1962, he confided to her, “How happy we are in the service of the Good God... We are aging, but our joy remains the same.”

Already feeling his strength waning, Good Pope John had written the following prayer the summer before:



O Jesus, here I am before you. You are suffering and dying for me, old as I am now and drawing near the end of my service and my life. Hold me closely, and near to your heart, letting mine beat with yours. I love to feel myself bound forever to you with a gold chain, woven of lovely, delicate links.

- *The first link: the justice which obliges me to find God wherever I turn.*
- *The second link: the providence and goodness which will guide my feet.*
- *The third link: love for my neighbor, unwearied and most patient.*
- *The fourth link: the sacrifice that must always be my lot, and that I will and must welcome at all times.*
- *The fifth link: the glory that Jesus promises me in this life and in eternity.*

O crucified Jesus, “my love and my mercy now and forever.” ‘Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done (Luke 22:42).’

It is not hard to imagine that if he had not been elected Pope, John XXIII might have chosen to spend his last years among the needy elderly in a home of the Little Sisters of the Poor. How readily he would have found himself at home among the poor and humble Residents of our homes, under the protection of his patron Saint Joseph, and of our foundress, Saint Jeanne Jugan! [📖](#)

Through the years with John Paul II

by Sister Mary Bernard du St. Esprit

Each of us enters human life at the moment decided by God, in a given history, a specific environment. My life's course has been such that important parts of it coincided with the pontificate of Pope John Paul II and were blessed with personal contacts, the reading of his many talks and writings specific to consecrated life, and the progressive awareness of the impact his own life's journey bore on the Church and the world.

Love and esteem for religious life

From the beginning of his pontificate Pope John Paul II grasped every opportunity that put him before an audience of consecrated women or men, to speak to them about the vitality and authenticity of religious life and to manifest to the world the depth of Christian life through a special consecration. With each successive address to religious, John Paul II recalled Vatican Council II's teaching and his own urgent desire for religious institutes' witness to Christ in the midst of a secularized world. I personally devoured many of our Holy Father's texts, relishing his thoughts and their impact in my own life.

Beatification of Jeanne Jugan

By the time volume two of *John Paul II Speaks to Religious* (collections of talks to consecrated religious) was in preparation for printing, the Beatification of Jeanne Jugan, our Mother Foundress



Provincial superior of our Baltimore province at the time, Sister Mary Bernard meets John Paul II at Castelgondolfo September 25, 1993.

and first Little Sister of the Poor, took place in Rome on October 2, 1982. I had the joy and privilege of being present, of observing the Pope at close range and of noting his obvious esteem and love for Jeanne Jugan (She was canonized in Rome, October 11, 2009, by Pope Benedict XVI).

When Pope John Paul II entered St. Peter's Basilica, one would have pitied him for what appeared a migraine headache. However, in beginning his homily with words from Mary's Magnificat: *Et exaltavit humiles!*, he threw his head back and continued in a spirit of jubilation: "These well-known words of the Magnificat fill my spirit and my heart with joy and emotion after I have just declared the humble Foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor one of the Blessed." For one whose motto, "Totus Tuus" confirmed his life-long devotion to the Mother of God, how normal to quote Mary in introducing another of her devotees and humble servant of the Lord, Jeanne Jugan!

Founding of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious in the US (CMSWR)

Fast forward ten years to January, 1992. Pope John Paul II received Cardinal James Hickey, archbishop of Washington, who had travelled to Rome. Three years earlier Cardinal Hickey had been

named liaison between the Vatican and the religious sisters of the United States who were not members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). In the interim months he attempted to fulfill the stipulation in his mandate: to encourage dialogue between the two groups. Following several failed attempts at dialogue, Cardinal Hickey submitted to his Holiness the possibility for the non-LCWR group of major superiors of women religious to found an entirely new group. John Paul II encouraged the Cardinal to go forward with this initiative. Working with several major superiors back in the United States, the process was begun under Cardinal Hickey's wise counsels and assistance. The following June 13th our Holy Father granted the new "Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious" (CMSWR) full canonical approval, while LCWR retained its own canonical status.

CMSWR's first Rome visit, 1993

An achievement of this nature is truly inspired and guided by the Spirit; it thrives in fidelity to the Holy Spirit and the Church. It has been my distinct privilege to have been part of the founding and growth of CMSWR. In conjunction with the planning, organizing and establishing of this new organization, there were numerous graces and opportunities. Among them were visits to Rome, audiences with Pope John Paul II, participation in World Youth Days and auditing of a Synod of Bishops in Rome.

To witness to our credibility and establish contact with those in the Vatican, visits of the CMSWR officers to Rome were nearly annual. On the very first trip to Rome in 1993, we were invited to attend a papal audience, after which we were received in a private audience. As our Holy Father circled the room, greeting the guests, he approached us with a smile in apparent recognition and awareness of our efforts over the years to sustain fidelity to our religious life and loyal support to the Church. After a personal word to each of his guests, John Paul II clearly told us that he was pleased and that he had three intentions for which he was praying. One of them was

for our Council of Major Superiors! We in turn thanked him for the approval of our Council and told him how much we appreciated his support of religious life and that we and all CMSWR communities were praying for him. How intensely and paternally he looked at us and thanked us!

CMSWR visit to Vatican, 1994

On a 1994 visit to the Vatican, the officers of CMSWR were invited to an early morning Mass in our Holy Father's private chapel. Archbishop Stanisław Dziwisz, the Pope's secretary asked me to do the first reading in English. I caught my breath and accepted. At the moment I read, I could feel his Holiness looking at me, probably to see who the lector was. It gave me a comforting reassurance. He did not preach nor distribute Holy Communion, but appeared lost in Christ whom he had called down on the altar. His very being seemed to create an atmosphere of recollection and of profound peace in God's presence.

1997: CMSWR participates in Synod on America

The year 1997 brought yet another privilege and a longer stay in the Eternal City. At that time I was the chairperson of CMSWR and in this capacity was invited as an "auditor" to the Synod of Bishops on America which lasted an entire month. At the opening Mass of the Synod in St. Peter's Basilica, I was one of those selected to receive Holy Communion from the hands of the Vicar of Christ himself, a deeply moving experience. Day after day, sitting in the "aula" (synod hall), I listened to successive interventions of the cardinals and bishops who presented situations, concerns, desires and causes in America (meaning North, South and Central America).

After a couple weeks the "auditors" learned that in addition to the interventions given by the cardinals and bishops, they too, could speak for six minutes. My choice of topic was self-evident, but I thought it best to consult with Cardinal Augustine Mayer, O.S.B., a friend of our community for many years and a resident



April 26, 1999: With their homemade apple pie, the CMSWR delegation lets Pope John Paul II know that “You are the apple of our eye.”

in Rome. Together we agreed that I would address the aspects of how a Little Sister of the Poor serves the elderly in the spirit of St. Jeanne Jugan and how in doing so, she strives to meet their need for love, respect, protection and accompaniment in the closing years of their life. I also told of our watch with the dying. When my time to speak arrived I invoked the Holy Spirit and began speaking into the microphone. From my place in the last row in the aula, I could see our Holy Father nodding in agreement. No one else to that point had spoken specifically of the elderly. Two years later Pope John Paul II wrote a heartfelt letter to the elderly in which he identified with them, encouraged them and emphasized the precious role that they play in the world.

Another select privilege during that Synod was an invitation issued to each participant to share an evening meal with the Pope. There were twelve guests from different countries who could all speak the same language, the cardinal responsible for the Synods and our Holy Father’s two secretaries. When we arrived we were taken into our Holy Father’s private chapel and then led to the dining room and seated. John Paul II entered last. He had a list of our names, to which he frequently referred in order to ask questions or feed into a



The CMSWR delegation with Pope John Paul II during his April 26, 1999 audience. Sister Mary Bernard is in the front row, second from the right.

conversation that included everyone, like in a family. The time flew by and we exited as we had entered, passing by the chapel. Outside we concurred that it had felt like being with a father who knew us and wanted to listen to all we had to say. Men and women alike, we were bursting with gratitude and somewhat hushed by the awesomeness of the evening.

Throughout the Synod Pope John Paul II added his own “comic relief.” One day he arrived four minutes late and chuckled that he was keeping a university schedule! Frequently he brandished his cane at one or another of the prelates, especially those who also had canes. On exiting the elevator, he was full of smiles and little comments to those down the stairs quick enough to meet him. At break time he would allow any of the prelates who wished to approach him to share pleasantries or snap a photo. One day our Holy Father caught his zucchetto, as if it were being blown away by a bishop who turned on full volume in inaugurating his intervention! Another day it was by tapping his cane that the Pope awakened the time-keeper and announced himself that it was time for a break!

Following the beautiful and colorful solemn Mass that concluded the Synod, all participants gathered in Santa Martha for a

festive meal. John Paul II was seated at the head table, not far from my assigned place. Thus, looking around from time to time, I was able to get a good glimpse of him. He looked tired, but animated and peaceful. Before the cardinals and bishops took leave they knelt one by one before the Holy Father to receive his paternal, papal blessing for a last time.

Dedication of the Domus Sanctae Mariae Guadalupe, April 25, 1999

Strongly encouraged by the Vatican, CMSWR researched and then opened a “House of Studies” in Rome. The intent was to provide safe and appropriate accommodations for young women religious studying in Rome whose communities were not present there. With assistance from the Holy See, an ideal location was discovered, renovated and made ready. On April 25, 1999, its dedication brought the attendance of many prelates and friends of CMSWR and its respective communities. Because Pope John Paul II was unable to accept our invitation, he delegated his Secretary of State, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, to represent him. His Holiness also favored us with the gift of one of his chalices with a note from Cardinal Sodano: In the name of our Holy Father and with his Benediction.

Three days after the dedication of the Domus, a large group comprised of CMSWR Board members, the sisters living at the Domus and the Sisters who had come to assist in organizing the event, were present in St. Peter’s Square for the Holy Father’s regular general audience. After he had delivered his message and his blessing, various groups were individually presented to him. Our CMSWR sisters were maneuvered into place, approaching the Holy Father from behind to both sides of him. One of the young sisters from the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart in Alhambra, CA had baked him an apple pie with a cut-out dough apple on top and a note that read: “You are the apple of our eye.” Our Holy Father really looked like he would have enjoyed a piece, but guards promptly swept it up and ushered us away. I did have the time, however, to thank our

Holy Father for having sent Cardinal Sodano, his Secretary of State, to represent him at the dedication of the Domus. It was over all too quickly, but those seconds held greater worth than the timing.

The graces of the Domus event were not yet complete. On the eve of our departure for the U.S., a Vatican call from Archbishop Stanisław Dziwisz invited us to our Holy Father's private Mass the next morning. So, on schedule at the bronze doors, we were checked off and led up to the papal apartments. Entering the chapel from behind, we saw the Pope seated, facing the tabernacle. Praise and thanksgiving filled our hearts during those intense moments of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Shortly after Mass all present were led into our Holy Father's library to await his arrival. Cameras preceded him and followed him as he moved from group to group. When he approached us, I used the opportunity to thank him for the personal gift of the beautifully engraved gold chalice he had sent for the Domus. He placed his hand on my left shoulder, looked at me and said, "Yes, yes, for CMSWR." The moment was captured in a treasured photo. Immediately I predicted to myself that at a not far distant date that hand would be one of a saint on whose intercession and blessing I could count.

Many are the other encounters and impressions that could be related of our beloved John Paul II, but words of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at our February 1, 2000 meeting with him sum up for me both the mystical and the human of his predecessor: People, especially young people are attracted by the Holy Father because "they see him as a living interpretation of the redemptive suffering of older people and of Christ on the Cross." What resonance this reflection finds in the heart of a Little Sister of the Poor! [!\[\]\(909ff976bf47376a7a813dc1902dc014_img.jpg\)](#)

Vocation as the sincere gift of self

by Sister Constance Carolyn of Mary

ALTHOUGH CALLED TO A LIFE OF HUMILITY, I don't mind admitting how proud I am to be a member of the John Paul II generation! Karol Józef Wojtyła was elected Pope during my junior year of high school. I was at a public school where we were assigned weekly reading from *Newsweek* magazine, and the cover of each issue was posted on the wall of our social studies classroom. By the end of October we had three popes smiling down on us — Paul VI, John Paul I and John Paul II! The next year, John Paul made the first of his numerous visits to the United States. I skipped classes — for the first time ever — so that I could hide out in the library and watch the Papal events. Suddenly I was hooked on the Church! It is no exaggeration to say that I was born spiritually, and that my vocation has unfolded, under the mantle of this great Pope. The ways and occasions of John Paul II's influence on my life are too numerous to count; but if I had to sum up the impact he has had on me, I would do so with the following four words: "sincere gift of self."

This expression is like a subtle thread running through many of the writings of our new saint. He spoke of the sincere gift of self in relation to marriage, motherhood and family life, consecrated life and priesthood, suffering, the Gospel of Life, the Church's missionary activity and the theology of the body. John Paul's consistent focus on this ideal seems to spring from a passage in *Gaudium et Spes*, a document of the Second Vatican Council which he helped to author:

The Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, "that all may be one. . . as we are one" (Jn 17:21-22) opened up vistas closed



to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself (n. 24).

“Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” — I heard these words in a doctrine class on the Trinity during my year of formation in preparation for perpetual profession. Our professor, a French Redemptorist, was discussing a letter John Paul II had recently written entitled *Mulieris Dignitatem, On the Vocation and Dignity of Women*. This was not the place one would expect to find life-changing teaching on the Trinity, but there it was:

The fact that man “created as man and woman” is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a “unity of the two” in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life.... To be human means to be called to interpersonal communion.

In developing this idea, John Paul quoted the passage from *Gaudium et Spes* about the sincere gift of self. Suddenly my vocation as a Little Sister at the service of the elderly, made sense in an entirely new way. I was created to be a gift! I had been attracted to a life of service because it drew out in me the capacity for self-gift. I already understood consecrated life as a response to God's gift of love and his invitation to live entirely for him. I also understood, as our *Constitutions* state, that our vow of hospitality "brings to perfection our gift to the Lord," giving specific form to the availability of heart and will which are found in the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience for the service of God and neighbor."

I suddenly realized that being in relationship, in the image of God who is Trinity — of God who is Love — defines what it is to be human. It also captures the ideal of consecrated life. Virginity is not to be considered a "mere 'no'," as John Paul II wrote, "but a 'profound 'yes' in the spousal order: the gift of self in a total and undivided manner." Consecrated women "realize the personal value of their own femininity by becoming a 'sincere gift' for God who has revealed himself in Christ ... One cannot correctly understand virginity — a woman's consecration in virginity — without referring to spousal love. It is through this kind of love that a person becomes a gift for the other."

Contemplating these words led to an entirely new appreciation of my vocation. I was made and called to be a gift — a gift to God and to the needy elderly whose lives I would touch. Again quoting John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, I understood that "a consecrated woman finds her Spouse, different and the same in each and every person, according to his very words: 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40)."

No other words have so filled me with joy and so deeply influenced my vocation. I pray that I will grow more and more generous in the gift of myself as the years pass, and that at the end of my life I will be able to say with John Paul II: "It is wonderful to be able to give oneself to the very end for the sake of the Kingdom of God!" [✚](#)



We are called to live in
a communion of love,
and in this way to mirror in the world
the communion of love
that is in *God*.

– Saint John Paul II

Consult not your fears
but your hopes and your dreams.
Think not about your frustrations,
but about your unfulfilled potential.
Concern yourself not with
what you tried and failed in,
but with what it is still possible
for you to do.

— Saint John XXIII

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