

# *Serenity*

October 2011

Little Sisters of the Poor

no. 153



*Christian hope*  
sees our final days as a time  
to prepare for  
our eternal destiny.



### Our Mission

As Little Sisters of the Poor, we care for the elderly poor in the spirit of humble service which we have received from Jeanne Jugan. We welcome the elderly as we would Jesus Christ himself and serve them with love and respect until death.

Cover photos

Front cover: Pope John Paul II hiking in Aosta, Italy, 1999.

Back inside cover: Pope Benedict XVI with disabled young people at the San José Foundation, Madrid, during World Youth Day events, August 20, 2011.

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*I believe that if I am sitting with  
a dying person and hold their hand,  
God himself is holding the other hand  
as he pulls that life toward him.  
What a great honor  
to be that close to God!*

– Elaine Musthaler, A.J.J., Baltimore

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#### Acknowledgments

Photos of Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI (front cover, inside back cover, pages 15–19): © L'Osservatore Romano, used with permission. Page 12: Illustration by Elizabeth Wang, Wang\_Radiant\_Light\_T-01038B-OL, "Jesus Christ comes to us in Holy Communion when we are sick or housebound," © Radiant Light 2006, www.radiantlight.org.uk. Photo, page 24: © James Baca, Denver Catholic Register, used with permission.

## To live each day with dignity

FROM TIME TO TIME OVER THE YEARS we have produced special issues of *Serenity* on topics of particular interest, among them respect for life and end of life care. Many Little Sisters have suggested that we do an updated issue on this latter subject and this seems like a providential moment to do so.

The reasons for this are numerous. First, recent political debate in our country has focused on health care issues, with heated discussion on the aging of our population and the burdens this imposes on our arguably inadequate system of medical and social services. Second, the recent beatification of Pope John Paul II has evoked the memory of his last days on earth, with the powerful witness he gave of a life so "grace-fully" and generously lived to the very end, despite obvious infirmity and suffering.

The third and most significant reason why this is such a providential moment to reflect anew on end of life care is that the United States Bishops have recently published a document entitled *To Live Each Day with Dignity: A Statement on Physician-Assisted Suicide*. This letter, and other resources provided by the Bishops on their website, are a valuable read for anyone who cares about the dignity of human life (<http://www.usccb.org/toliveeachday/>).

It is striking—and indicative of Catholic teaching—that in writing about death, the Bishops speak more about living than dying. They speak of how to live one's last days as fully and meaningfully as possible, and of how to surround those who are dying with the loving care they deserve. The first lines of their statement exemplify this approach, which is so grounded in the Culture of Life:



*To live in a manner worthy of our human dignity, and to spend our final days on this earth in peace and comfort, surrounded by loved ones—that is the hope of each of us. In particular, Christian hope sees these final days as a time to prepare for our eternal destiny.*

The Church neither denies nor sugar-coats the obvious realities of suffering and death. Rather, she urges believers to experience them in the light of Christian faith and hope, uniting them to the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In his encyclical on the virtue of hope, Pope Benedict wrote that “A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through “com-*passion*” is a cruel and inhuman society” (*Spes salvi*, n. 38).

For this issue of *Serenity* we invited Little Sisters, staff, volunteers and Association Jeanne Jugan members to reflect on their work with the elderly, especially those nearing the end of life’s journey. We asked them how they see this work as “pro-life” and what lessons they have learned from the Residents. We also invited them to share stories of particularly memorable moments spent with the dying. From the insights shared on these pages it is clear that those who participate in our apostolate do not see this work as without hope. They know how to share in the sufferings of others in a way that makes them, in some way, their own—this is compassion.

From Enfield, Connecticut, live-in volunteer Katy Lover writes, “*I have come to discover that caring for the elderly, the infirm, and the dying is truly a ‘pro-life’ ministry. Yes, our society most often associates the term ‘pro-life’ with issues surrounding the unborn. As important and beautiful as the ministry of protecting and safeguarding the rights of our frail and vulnerable unborn is, I believe that we can, many times, overlook the importance of fighting for the preservation, dignity, and protection of our elderly. ... Our culture is very ‘work/achievement-oriented,’ and the elderly no longer fit into that ‘successful’ category. Though they experience physical and mental decline more and more with each passing day, and though it can be hard to be patient with them, I have come to see that*

*the elderly have much to offer someone like me, who is just as ‘achievement-oriented’ as most others in our society. Working with them has forced me to be more patient, humble....”*

Judith Owens, a member of the Association Jeanne Jugan (AJJ) in Philadelphia, also notes society’s tendency not to see those who suffer: “*The elderly are too often invisible. It’s uncomfortable for many, particularly in today’s youth-obsessed culture, to witness deteriorating bodies, the challenges of physical limitations and the embarrassment of increasing dementia. We forget that life is lived in many forms and should be celebrated in all its stages from conception to the moment when we take our last breaths.*”

Champtak Perera, an AJJ member in Colombo, Sri Lanka, reminds us that life is sacred, whether at the beginning or end of its course: “Life is many a thing—be it the embryo at the beginning of life or the old person at the end of life. The life that runs through any beating heart—no matter how old or how young—is ‘LIFE,’ and supporting it in any form has to be ‘pro-life’. In my mind the elderly or infirm person deserves the same compassion as a newborn, for both are unable to care for themselves and both depend on the Good Samaritan in you and me for love and support.”

Let us each be the Good Samaritan for whom those nearing the end of life’s journey are reaching out. Like Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, shown above visiting a sick Resident of Jeanne Jugan Residence in the Bronx, let us not be too busy to bend over the elderly and dying, to extend to them a hand of friendship, care and compassion. 🌸



## Lessons learned from the elderly

We asked our collaborators—staff, volunteers and Association Jeanne Jugan members—to share with us the lessons they have learned in caring for the elderly, sick and dying. Some of their insights follow.

WHILE CARING FOR THOSE IN THE FADING YEARS OF LIFE as a nurse, I am constantly aware that each life comes to an end—sometimes unexpectedly, sometimes preceded by subtle or obvious hints, sometimes during a silent vigil. I've learned we should be prepared for death by “having our house in order” and by making the most of each day until then.

– Carol Kawasaki, RN, Totowa, NJ

ONE OF THE MOST MEANINGFUL LESSONS I HAVE LEARNED in my career of caring for the elderly during their sickness and death is that faith and love are most important at the end of life.

– Nancy Douglass, LPN, Baltimore, MD

I'VE LEARNED THAT LIKE ANYONE IN THE WORLD, the elderly, sick and dying can pray, and I have a sneaking suspicion that their prayers can be quite powerful! All of those in the home are making a substantial contribution to the salvation of souls through their prayer! Who said their lives weren't worth living? I find fewer things in this world more inspiring than the thought of the elderly soldiering on with hope and faith, accepting the crosses that God has allowed for them.

– Chris Blackburn, volunteer, Melbourne, Australia

IT WASN'T UNTIL I STARTED WORKING IN LONG TERM CARE that I came to really understand and embrace the life cycle. I had always been kind and respectful to my elders but I had never felt a connection to them. As a kid they were my keepers. They sat on the porch



as we played in the street, making sure we didn't do anything that our parents would disapprove of. As a young adult they were like muzak on an elevator; pleasant but seriously uncool.

As the elderly became part of my everyday life my relationship to them changed, and those relationships changed me. At first I only saw broken bodies. I did my best to fix them. It was heartbreaking and frustrating. Then there were always the outrages from government. At one point they decided that the poor were only entitled to one pair of dentures in a lifetime; no matter why another set was needed. These were battles I could not win. Early in my long-term care career there was a wonderful lady named Mary Douglass who helped me recognize and embrace the life cycle. She noticed how upset I was because her roommate had gotten worse and had to be sent to the E.R. Mary hardly talked at all. Sometimes when she looked me in the eye I got the feeling she was seeing more than I wanted her to see. She gave me one of those looks and said “Honey, we're all gonna die. Each page of our life turns 'til we get to the end. We just have to put a good story on the pages.”

At that moment I found comfort and peace in those words. In



the months and years that followed, I tried to read the pages of my Residents' lives and help make the last ones among the best. Some of the stories are funny, some are dark. I try not only to listen, but to understand. I try to guide them through the medical maze as a friend.

I hope that I have brought as much to the lives of the elderly as they have brought to mine. For most of my career I have worked with the poor. Some had no family or friends. They were used to taking whatever was thrown their way. Some would consider them throwaways. They are not; nobody is. They taught me to stop knowing things in my head but to feel them in my heart. They taught me to understand and embrace the changes that we go through, for change is the only constant in life. At the end of their lives the dignity of life should be honored and respected.

– Renita Alexander, LPN, Saint Louis, MO

IN CARING FOR THE ELDERLY, I have certainly learned a great deal about patience, an honorable attribute which I have not yet mastered, but am still striving for! I have also learned to practice gratitude everyday for the gifts, possessions, and people that I currently have, for as a person ages, he or she experiences many losses which are painfully hard to accept. ... In being so close to the elderly, I am learning to treasure life in a much more profound way, and I am learning to see more clearly the vulnerability and beauty of each individual person. Caring for the elderly forces me to come out of my "comfort-zone," to be other-centered. It helps me to try to find the living Christ within them, loving them as they are just as much as he loves me as I am.

Caring for the elderly continues to teach me about the beauty and attractiveness of motherhood, a beautiful calling which requires total self-giving to a totally dependent, little, frail, fallen creature who loves you unconditionally and trusts you with all his/her little heart. The frail elderly are like little children who are dependent on their mothers for warmth and protection. ... As one who has had



the wonderful opportunity of living with the elderly day in and day out as part of the Little Sisters' live-in program, I thank the Little Sisters of the Poor and the elderly for helping me to grow more and more into a mother, a most sweet and precious gift for which I am forever grateful.

– Katy Lover, live-in volunteer, Enfield, CT

THE DYING HAVE NOT ONLY TAUGHT ME ABOUT DEATH, but more about life and how much it should be celebrated and lived to the full!

– Champitak Perera, A.J.J., Colombo, Sri Lanka

I HAVE BEEN PRIVILEGED TO BE A PART-TIME CARER for my younger sister during her prolonged illness (leukemia) and death, and also for my elderly father who died after spending several months fighting cancer. I have thus been taught three very important lessons: 1) Never give up on hope, as hope helps you wait; 2) Forget PLOM (Poor Little Old Me!); Never give in to your own grief, as your time to mourn is after their death and not before! and finally, 3) Recognize that God is reaching out to you through another's suffering!

– Geoff McIlroy, seminarian intern, Melbourne, Australia



THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON I have learned from the elderly is to enjoy the “little things” in life—to take pleasure in a song, a kind word, a laugh, a touch. I have learned to slow down because when you speed through life you miss out on the important things!

– Judith Owens, A.J.J., Philadelphia, PA

WE RUSH AROUND IN OUR SOCIETY. We are impatient. The elderly teach us patience. Each of us will slow down. We will need assistance. It may be our vision or hearing or our ability to walk. The elderly teach us kindness. Every day I witness our Residents reaching out to each other. They build each other up and wish each other well. They share their belongings. They no longer grip tightly to the things of this world. They share their time, their stories, their pains and sufferings. The elderly accept what comes their way. They adapt to changes, even the ones that they would never choose for themselves. The elderly remind us constantly of God ... of spiritual things, not those of the world. They remind us of the gift of faith that may be resting in us as we are still so independent. They teach us gratitude and appreciation. They appreciate a visit, a smile, a hug, a good joke, laughter, simplicity. They show us hope, that we must never lose hope, even if our minds falter. The Spirit lives on forever. The joy lives on forever. The elderly are instruments that God uses to show us how to live each day with dignity... a lesson of which our society is so desperately in need.

– Irene O'Connor, Activities Director, Philadelphia, PA

“AND AFTER THIS OUR EXILE, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” Gathered about the bedside of a dying Resident of Mullen Home in Denver, we sang these words of prayer and bade a faithful Catholic, a loving mother and grandmother, a devoted spouse, and a Dominican laywoman a safe journey to her heavenly homeland. It was our first visit to the Little Sisters, and having been Dominican novices for only a few weeks, the request to pray at this woman’s side, with her family gathered about us, was as startling as it was

humbling. While to an observer it would have seemed that this batch of novices was doing the ministering, they were in fact the students in this school of life laid out before them: the grace and peace of this woman and her loved ones, the palpable faith in the small room, all spoke of years of discipleship, of a life lived to the full to the very end.

After this first encounter, the two of us were to return every week during our novitiate year to minister to the Residents of Mullen Home. While most of our days there did not mirror the intensity of the first, time and again we witnessed the dedication of the Sisters and the staff to creating an environment that reminds the Residents that their lives are still worth living, that their lives are as dignified now as they ever have been. For while their pains and aches, their loneliness and sorrow, and their being cast aside by a functionally-minded society can make them wonder why they are still on this earth, they ultimately know, and are constantly reminded, that God knows what he’s up to. Though they can no longer do what they once did, life is not about doing: it is about being, for the very fact that we accept the gift of life gives praise to God!

Regardless of our state in life, God’s calling to live out this gift is always the same: “What does the LORD ask of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)—we are called to be lovers of God and neighbor (cf. Matthew 22:37-40). Early on in our religious life, we have seen faith, not as an abstract concept, but as a lived reality in the Sisters and Residents, and this will no doubt have a lasting impact on us. Every moment of our lives is precious in the eyes of God, who caresses us in his arms from the moment of our conception until our birth to eternal life, and so it seems the only possible response of love is to live every moment in gratitude, anchored in our relationship with God as his children. As one of the Residents reminds us, this is simpler than we might imagine: “I’m ninety-eight years old. I don’t know why God still wants me here.” With a shrug of her shoulders and a smile born of years of faith, she decidedly affirms: “We trust God!”

– Br. James-Peter Trares, O.P. and Br. Vincent Dávila, O.P., Denver CO



## Unforgettable experiences in the care of the dying

**The care of the dying is the summit of our apostolate. It is no wonder then, that many Little Sisters have been deeply touched by their experiences with the dying. Several share their stories from near and far.**

IN 1989 I WAS STATIONED AT “NYUMBA YA WAZEE,” our home in Mombasa, Kenya. Pricilla had been found in a small isolated village, malnourished and crippled. A Little Sister carried her in her arms into our home. She was immediately bathed, reclothed, given food and in little time she took on the semblance of a beautiful elder woman. Pricilla loved the chapel, where she found peace. After a year filled with happiness, security, and being overshadowed with great love and respect, Pricilla was readying her soul to return to God.

As death drew near, the Little Sisters took their hours to watch and pray at Pricilla’s bedside. My watch was from midnight to 3:00 a.m. About 1:00 a.m., a tropical rainstorm loomed over Mombasa and all of the electricity went out in our home. I was truly in Black Africa and could not see twelve inches in front of me. I remembered there was a candle in the sitting room down the hall with matches lying beside it and so I precariously felt my way to fetch it. Lighting the small candle, I made my way back to Pricilla and continued my prayerful watch. I simply prayed the Hail Mary slowly in Swahili as Pricilla’s dying lips tried so hard to pray along. In that pitch-dark night in Africa, with the storm ravaging around us and in the flicker of a small candle light, Pricilla gave her soul back to God in peace and joy. My heart was exuding joy in my call to be a Little Sister of the Poor, to care for Jesus in the poor and suffering and to watch and pray with him in his last agony in the person of the elderly.

– Sr Beatrice Mary

AS A COLLEGE STUDENT WORKING WITH THE LITTLE SISTERS and trying to discern the Lord’s call, I had the opportunity to care for a woman who had initially been very healthy and spry and who suddenly, after a severe stroke, became totally dependent and unable to willfully communicate at all with us anymore—or so it seemed. As I cared for this bed-bound woman, the Lord himself reached out to me and healed something in me that needed healing at an interior place that no one else could ever have reached, melting the personal walls that inhibited me from reaching out in love to those around me. The Lord is very present and active in those who are sick and suffering, in this mystery of human suffering, and is there dispensing many graces.

I have been by the bedside of many a dying Resident and have seen so many beautiful moments of love, reconciliation and reminiscing between loved ones who have shared their lives with our aged Residents preparing to journey onward toward heaven. They are some of the most profound, intimate and beautiful moments I have ever lived and would not trade them for anything. Nor would I wish that any family be deprived of such deeply meaningful encounters because of any “new” legislation which would take us away from our true dignity and calling to live as human persons, made in the image and likeness of God, the Blessed Trinity, the ultimate example of giving and receiving in love. Accompanying a dying person with compassion and love should be regarded as a high point in our vocation as human persons, a privilege, because it is one of the prime times that we can demonstrate our call to be a gift to others in need.

– anonymous







The title of this painting by British artist Elizabeth Wang, “Jesus Christ comes to us in Holy Communion when we are sick or housebound,” clearly describes the reality it seeks to express. How often the Little Sisters, family members and other caregivers, as well as the Residents themselves, sense the presence of Christ at the bedside, in the midst of suffering.

A REFUGEE FROM NORTH KOREA, Magdalena was very spiritual and had been a catechist in her village. So I was very surprised when shortly after her arrival at the home she said to me, “Sister, I’ll be happy to pray with the Residents, to teach them about religion, and to help you in any way that I can, but please never, never ask me to visit or pray with someone who is dying. I am so afraid of death.” I reassured her that I would never ask her to do anything that would make her feel uncomfortable. A couple months later a Resident whose room was close to Magdalena’s was gravely ill and close to death. Magdalena remained in her own room, but often furtively

opened the door and observed the Sisters going in and out of the dying lady’s room. From there she could hear the prayers and the soft hymns being sung.

After the Lord had called the other woman to her eternal reward, Magdalena saw the large number of Residents and parishioners who came to chant the long traditional prayers. As much as possible, these prayers are said without ceasing from the time of death until the time of burial. After observing all this, Magdalena attended the Mass of Christian Burial and said to me afterwards, “I am no longer afraid to die, and I will be happy to help anyone who is dying. I have seen with what great love the Little Sisters cared for that dying lady, and I know that you will do the same for me. Thank you.” This incident impressed deeply upon me that our actions or interactions with one person have a great impact upon others. In this case, our care for a dying Resident helped another Resident to shed her own fear of death and to envision her future with peace.

– Sr Lawrence Mary

JOSEPH MARAFINO DIED AT THE MALONEY HOME in Scranton, Pennsylvania forty one years ago. He was an immigrant from Italy and may have been a father, husband, and grandfather. I don’t know about any of that. I just know that he was a barber all his life in Philadelphia, and in his late eighties, he still had black hair and bushy eyebrows. He was about 4’11’, thin, and full of arthritis in his hands and knees. His greatest joys were the Mass, still being a barber, talking to others and listening to them. He also had a beautiful gold medal of St. Joseph that he always wore around his neck. I have a great love for St. Joseph, and I loved Joe Marafino.

Joe came to Scranton when the home on Chester Avenue closed temporarily for reconstruction because he really had no other place to go in Philly, and because the Little Sisters loved him, and he loved them. He joined the other nine “gentlemen” who lived in the basement bedroom. There were white curtains between each bed, a night stand, and a common bathroom with the basics. The home had a barber shop, directly across from the big bedroom. It became



the official and exclusive domain of Joseph Marafino. He reigned supreme, at the service of anyone who would take him up on his offer to give them a shave or haircut. His services became better and better known, and even the chaplain became his customer.

Over time, however, Joe's eyesight diminished, and his customers became more and more wary of his skills. The end point came rather abruptly, the day he trimmed Father's hair WAY above his ears! After that, Joe seemed to grow thinner and thinner. He needed more help with getting about and getting up. He needed to be cared for. Then, we all knew Joe was dying. Father anointed him, and it was the time to keep vigil at his bedside. Joe was alert and at peace. We took our turns being with him, and I wanted, very much, to be with Joe when he died.

Our connection was more intimate than anything I had ever experienced on earth. Our bond at the closing of his life seemed a relationship that God alone could have made possible, because there was no earthly reason for it. I was with him when his life's journey ended. He was with God forever.

After Joe died, and we cared for his physical needs for the last time, I had a few silent moments with him after everyone else had visited and prayed, before the undertaker arrived. At that moment, the tears that fell were the tears of a mother, a sister, a daughter, and the best of friends. They were tears that expressed the great love I had for Joe, and my joy that our lives had been mysteriously intertwined. I realized, at that moment, that God had called me to love others with HIS love ... that God wanted me to be a sign of his love for the persons he would put into my life, and that he was using me to bring them to himself. I understood that as a Little Sister, my life was not my own. Through my vocation in the Church, I would witness to the compassion of Christ in ways that one person could never do by herself. At that moment, I prayed for Joe, and I experienced, in the deepest recesses of my heart, Christ's words: "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you." It is that realization that has sustained me, nourished my faith, and given me hope as my journey continues.

— Sr Paul Mary

(continued on page 20)

## TO THE VERY END

In his 1999 *Letter to the Elderly*, Pope John Paul II wrote that despite the limitations brought on by old age, he continued to enjoy life. "It is wonderful to be able to give oneself to the very end for the sake of the Kingdom of God!" he wrote. "At the same time," he continued, "I find great peace in thinking of the time when the Lord will call me: from life to life!"

On the next few pages we take a look at the witness of our new Blessed, who gave his life to the very end.







“Precisely as so-called “senior citizens,” you have a specific contribution to make to the development of a genuine “culture of life”—you have, we have, because I also belong to your age group—witnessing that every moment of our existence is a gift of God, and that every season of human life has special treasures to put at the disposal of all.”

– Homily for the Jubilee of the Elderly,  
September 17, 2000



“How many people find understanding and comfort from elderly people who may be lonely or ill and yet are able to instill courage by their loving advice, their silent prayers, or their witness of suffering borne with patient acceptance! 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.”

– Letter to the Elderly, 1999







“Precisely in the redemptive suffering of Christ lies the true answer to the challenge of pain, which weighs so much on our human condition. Indeed, Christ took upon himself our sufferings, he assumed our pain, casting a new light of hope and life upon them through his Cross and his Resurrection. Dear brothers and sisters, elderly friends! In a world like this which often makes a myth of strength and power, it is your mission to witness to the values which truly count, going beyond appearances, and which endure forever because they are engraved on the heart of every human being and guaranteed by the Word of God.”

– Homily for the Jubilee of the Elderly,  
September 17, 2000

“If growing old, with its inevitable conditions, is accepted serenely in the light of faith, it can become an invaluable opportunity for better comprehending the Mystery of the Cross, which gives full sense to human existence. ... Knowledge of the nearness of the final goal leads the elderly person to focus on that which is essential, giving importance to those things that the passing of years do not destroy. One must become accustomed to thinking confidently about the mystery of death, so that the definitive encounter with God occur in a climate of interior peace, in the awareness that He “who knit me in my mother’s womb” (cf. Psalm 139:13b) and who willed us “in his image and likeness” (cf. Gen. 1:26) will receive us.”

– Message for Lent, 2005





LOUISE MANKASSA was a lady that I had the great privilege of getting to know while I worked in our home in Brazzaville in the Republic of the Congo. She was of the Lari tribe and only spoke that language. I knew a few words, but as sometimes happens, (and it is always very special when it does) relationships can be forged by a common sentiment of affection and understanding without too much need for verbal communication. Anyone who has cared for someone with dementia will understand what I mean. Ours was one such relationship.

Louise did not have dementia, but I learned from others that her life had been marked by much suffering. She bore the great misfortune of being childless and this drew down upon her much derision and abuse. She was eventually even accused of witchcraft, a very serious accusation in that part of the world. The threat against her was so great that at one point there was an attempt to end her life by hanging. The attempt was unsuccessful thanks to the intervention of a priest, but she bore the physical scars of this trauma to the end of her life.

When she arrived in our home as a Resident, she literally had

nothing. She was enchanted by her room, with a real bed and a sink with running water. She settled in very quickly and was delighted to discover among the other Residents an elderly gentleman who had once been her catechist and sponsor as she became a Christian. Louise lived her life with us very peacefully. I don't think that she had ever known such happiness. She was grateful for everything and cared very sincerely for those around her, including me.

One day Louise was having trouble dressing herself. It soon became apparent that something wasn't right, although in that poverty stricken country we were never able to find out exactly what it was. Before long she lay in bed dying. My heart was broken as I watched someone who had become a good friend slowly slipping away. As it became obvious that she had entered her final agony, I found it impossible to stop the tears from flowing. I sat beside her, held her hand and prayed as I gazed upon her face. She took her final breath, and then very suddenly my tears stopped. I could not believe what I was seeing. Immediately after her death, her face became as if transfigured. She suddenly seemed young and extremely beautiful. There was a look of deep peace and joy on her countenance that my poor words cannot describe. I have only seen a similar look in death once in the many years since then, and that was on the face of the gentleman who had been her catechist. "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours" (Luke 6, 20).

Louise Mankassa, I pray to her now and I know she hears me. She remains forever in my memory and in my heart.

– Sr Maria Ann

MARY WAS OUR OLDEST RESIDENT IN THE HOME, and for years could be found in two places during the course of a typical morning. First, she'd be volunteering for several hours in the laundry, something she'd done for over a decade; later in the morning, she'd be in the chapel, for rosary, Mass and Holy Communion. The Eucharist was very important to her, and in the last few weeks of her life, when her appetite diminished so dramatically, her hunger for the Eucharist



grew ever stronger. Towards the end, she slept during most of the day, as well as the night. However, she was relatively sharp mentally when awake. When I'd check on her in her room as she tried to eat a little breakfast, and I'd ask if she wanted the Sisters to bring her Holy Communion that afternoon, she'd light up and say very emphatically, "Oh, yes, Sister," and she'd always add, "And you know, Sister, if I'm asleep, please wake me up. I have no trouble going right back to sleep."

Mary spent a few weeks in her room at the end of her life, and several times we thought her time was coming. Then she'd rally, and seem to improve, coming out for a meal or two or going to have her hair done. In the twelve hours prior to her death, Mary was as awake as she'd been in weeks. She ate a good breakfast and more dinner than she'd eaten for months. I had the opportunity to spend half an hour at her bedside that afternoon, and because she was so bright and eager to talk, she told me about her life before her marriage, recounted stories of her husband's noble integrity, and once again shared with me a favorite story she'd often told, about a kindergarten girl Mary had taught shortly after she'd completed her education. When this five-year-old was placed in a corner of the classroom briefly due to misbehavior, she'd chanted repeatedly in a sing-song voice, "Miss O'Donnell's a picklepus. Miss O'Donnell's a picklepus." Mary smiled as she recalled both the first and last name of this child, nearly eighty years after the incident!

It is the weekday routine in our home that the Sisters take Communion to the sick after our evening prayer, and so on this day, Mary received Holy Communion in her room in the late afternoon. She had a bit of supper, and then while being cleaned up right after supper, in preparation for a good night's sleep, Mary simply stopped breathing. No struggle. No warning. No pain. Her chariot arrived, and Mary hopped on to go to meet her Lord.

There are two lessons I learned from Mary's life and death. First, part of treating a Resident with dignity is to provide for them, as much as we are able, not only what they need physically, but also



what they need spiritually. Mary had been a daily communicant for years, and it was a real sacrifice for her to no longer have the stamina to sit up long enough to go to Mass. Her vision and hearing were so poor that she was unable to participate via television. However, when the Sisters brought Holy Communion to her, she never failed to respond to the prayers appropriately. And she always expressed her appreciation that when she couldn't go to meet Jesus in the chapel, we brought him to her! I am so grateful that we were able to provide for Mary the continuation of her daily reception of the Eucharist, even as she declined.

The other lesson I re-learned, actually, from Mary's death, is that God is in charge of when we come into the world and when we leave. Although we are sometimes able to predict when a Resident's time to leave this world is very close, there are other times that death approaches so silently and painlessly that we are taken somewhat by surprise. For that reason, every day is the "right" day to prepare our Residents for the last leg of their earthly journey—and to keep ourselves prepared, as well!

— Sr. Judith





IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY CONVICTION that old age and illness are not synonymous and that one lives until one is called by God in death. Among my many experiences of assisting the dying, one eighty-eight year old woman remains vivid in my memory. She had been a Resident in the home for nearly five years. A hospitalization for a severe heart attack had been preceded by surgery and radiation for cancer and precipitated her entering the home. Her husband, a wonderful companion and great father to their

four children, had died of a heart condition that later in time would have been treatable.

Mollie was endowed with a great sense of humor, readily laughing at herself and eager to be part of whatever. Quickly at home with the other Residents, she encouraged them to play Bingo, play cards or be on hand for any activity. A great baseball fan from childhood, she dressed in team sweats and displayed her memorabilia during baseball season. Her children were very attentive to her and often took her out for her favorite corn meal mush. As she declined physically, they took turns staying with their mother around the clock. If the nurses didn't catch it first, the children would report the need for medication to relieve any discomfort. Because Mollie was progressively less able to take food, the staff and Little Sisters

would go the extra mile to satisfy any slight food craving, even if she tasted but one bite.

Proud of her Catholic faith and faithful in living it, she participated in the services her health would allow. Her children would join her at Mass, in receiving Holy Communion or in praying the rosary in her room. As she grew weaker, her conversation diminished, but she still had a special word with each of her children and others who came to see her. A couple days before her death, Mollie greeted one of her daughters with the following revelation: "I just had the most beautiful dream. I saw your father and he was calling me to join him in heaven. It was glorious." The daughter was awed by her mother's dream and shared it with her siblings. The day before Mollie died was a rather restless day for her. That evening however, she exclaimed, "I have just had the most wonderful day" and began thanking every one for what they had done for her, for their presence, their care. What an impression that made! Lucid until the end, she was surrounded by her children praying the rosary as she was dying. Many graces had been received by Mollie's family, the Little Sisters and everyone at the home who had known her. Shortly after Mollie's death, one of her daughters who had joined another Christian church and for whom Mollie had prayed many years, returned to the Church. To this day the entire family relives the memories of Mollie's 70's and 80's, but most especially the final weeks and months when they journeyed with her through the valley of death and experienced with her the dignity and richness of living every moment of earthly existence until God himself determines its consummation.

Many more true stories like Mollie's could be told if family, caregivers and environment were respectful of human life, were creative in enhancing the dignity of the elderly and their dying process and sincerely witnessed to the sacredness of life received from God and to belief in the reality of eternal life.

– Sr. Mary Bernard



## V.I.P.'s visiting at a home near you!

This summer we realized that V.I.P.'s —very important persons(!)—come in all ages, styles and nationalities ... and some are actually living quietly among us!

IT SEEMS LIKE V.I.P.'S HAVE BEEN TURNING UP ALL OVER the past few months! On May 19<sup>th</sup> our Little Sisters and Residents in **TAIPEI, TAIWAN**, received a visit from Chow Mei-ching, their country's first lady. Dressed casually in jeans and a polo shirt representing a charity she supports, the first lady wanted her visit to be informal as well. She was accompanied by an aboriginal children's choir, which performed several Taiwanese folk songs and dances for the Residents.

The first lady was presented with handmade gifts by two Residents. She then toured the infirmary, where a Resident priest assured her of everyone's prayers for the country. She even shared a simple meal with the Residents before going from table to table to greet everyone. Residents and Sisters alike were impressed by their first lady's great simplicity and cordiality!

Our Little Sisters in **SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA** have two V.I.P.'s living among them! Mrs Rosa Chae and Mrs Monica Yen Yongbon, both relatives of Little Sisters, celebrated their 100<sup>th</sup> birthday together on June 4<sup>th</sup>. They were surrounded by a large number of family, friends and Little Sisters.



Opposite page:  
Taiwan's first lady  
poses with the  
Little Sisters and  
Residents' band.  
Above: one of the  
gentlemen pres-  
ents Chow Mei-  
ching with a gift  
he made himself.

Left: Mrs Rosa  
Chae and Mrs  
Monica Yen Yong-  
bon surrounded  
by the community  
of Seoul.

Below: Our two  
centenarians  
look splendid  
in their  
traditional  
Korean  
dresses,  
which were  
specially  
made for  
the big  
occasion.





Perth: a staff member leans over a Resident during the home's Royal bridal fashion parade on April 29<sup>th</sup>.



Princess Kate might not have been there herself, but the Residents did receive a note from the Queen ... The activities staff at our home in **PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA** noticed that the Residents were taking quite an interest in the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton this spring. So they planned a day's worth of activities to coincide with the Royal Wedding and wrote to Queen Elizabeth herself to assure her of the Residents' best wishes for the couple and to share their excitement with her. How pleased they were to receive a thank you note from the Queen's private secretary!

On April 29<sup>th</sup> the home's Royal Wedding festivities began with an elegant wedding fashion show, featuring gowns and accessories from the 1950's to the 1990's, all lent and modeled by staff and friends of the home. A wedding breakfast was served after the fashion show.

The home's wedding-themed activities also included a display of wedding photos belonging to Residents and staff, dating from 1926 to the present. Staff member Linda Wisoloth commented on the aim of the display: "It brings dignity to the Residents because it reminds us that they were once youthful and in love. Their meaningful lives and stories of the past are still very much part of who they are today."

Sister Angela, the home's superior, added a wish for the big day as the celebration wound down: "Today let us form a circle of love



that gathers our whole family as one. Residents, we care about you now in the evening of your lives. We also care about your past and your future."

On June 27<sup>th</sup> the Little Sisters and Residents of **JEANNE JUGAN RESIDENCE IN WASHINGTON, D.C.** really did receive a visit from a princess! Her Royal Highness Princess Mathilde of Belgium spent an hour at the home during a visit to the United States with her husband, Crown Prince Philippe.

A princess doesn't just drop in, so weeks of planning and several security checks preceded the brief visit. Her Royal Highness did not disappoint! After introductions and the presentation of gifts—she was given a necklace for herself and sweaters for her children, all handmade by Residents—the Little Sisters and elderly sang our "of-

ficial" canonization hymn, *Sister and Servant of the Poor*. There is an obvious link between our foundress and Princess Mathilde, since Jeanne Jugan was canonized alongside Damien de Veuster, apostle to the lepers of Molokai, and a native of Belgium. The Princess



then took the time to greet everyone in the auditorium individually—from Residents, to staff, volunteers and Little Sisters.

Princess Matilde listened attentively as one Resident recounted her experiences under an oppressive political regime and her journey to the United States ... She admired an Indian Resident's sari, admitting she is too tall to ever wear one ... The Princess spoke Italian to a Resident from that country and a little Spanish to a Mexican friend of the home ... She caught on rather quickly when one of the gentlemen got in line to greet her a second time, saying, "I think I know you!" Each person had their moment with the Princess, each one was received and listened to as if they were the only one present. Her graciousness and attentiveness impressed everyone!

On August 17<sup>th</sup> the Little Sisters in **OREGON, OH** had a visitor of a completely different type. E. Gordon Gee, president of Ohio State University, fulfilled a promise he had made after his now-famous gaffe comparing other schools' football teams to the Little Sisters of the Poor. He later admitted that he didn't even know we existed when he repeated the old joke, and vowed to do what he could to help make our mission better known.

"Everyone having fun? I'm moving in, I just registered," President Gee told the enthusiastic crowd gathered at the Sacred Heart Home on August 17<sup>th</sup>. He added that he would like to see more O.S.U. alumni become involved in volunteer outreach to the home. Mother Cecilia Mary welcomed the idea, adding that she is also eager to add more O.S.U. alumni to the home's roster of benefactors, so that through the Little Sisters' prayers, the University's alumni can arrive at the same destination as all our L.S.P. alumni!



Above: Everyone—except the Little Sisters of course—dressed in Ohio State red and gray, and images of the O.S.U. Buckeye were in abundance. Brutus, the University's official mascot, entertained, along with a corps of O.S.U. cheerleaders.

Right: Mother Cecilia looks on as President E. Gordon Gee shows off the bow tie he received from the Sisters. It bears both the Ohio State and Little Sisters' logos.



A group of Little Sisters, Residents and friends will be guests of President Gee at an Ohio State football game this fall, where he has promised them a big surprise!

As the Ohio State pep bus rolled away, Mother Cecilia expressed her gratitude to a reporter, "We're very lowly, humble people," she said. "We take care of the poor and try to reach out to get support. This has opened whole new doors for us."



“**WHEN SUFFERING APPEARS** on the horizon of a young life, we are shaken; perhaps we ask ourselves: “Can life still be something grand, even when suffering unexpectedly enters it?” ...

The preferential love of the Lord for the suffering helps us to see others more clearly and to give them, above and beyond their material demands, the look of love which they need. But this can only happen as the fruit of a personal encounter with Christ. You yourselves—as religious, family members, health care professionals and volunteers who daily live and work with these young people—know this well....

You are also witnesses of the immense goodness which the lives of these young people represent for those who love them, and for humanity as a whole. In a mysterious yet real way, their presence awakens in our often hardened hearts a tenderness which opens us to salvation.

Our society, which all too often questions the inestimable value of life, of every life, needs you: in a decisive way you help to build the civilization of love. What is more, you play a leading role in that civilization.”

– Pope Benedict XVI, message to disabled young people  
at World Youth Day, August 20, 2011



Look for more WYD coverage in our next issue of Serenity!



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“I am definitively loved and whatever  
happens to me—I am awaited by this Love.  
And so my life is good.”

– St. Josephine Bakhita

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