

Serenity

April 2012

Little Sisters of the Poor

no. 155

*Interdependence,
not independence,
is the true
gospel value.*





Our Mission

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

Cover photo: *Lean on Me*, sculpture by Cindy Burden. Used with the kind permission of the artist. Visit Ms. Burden's online studio at <http://sculpturebycindyburden1.homestead.com/> to see the other pieces in her collection.

serenity

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To obtain *Heaven's Homecoming*, by Rev. Douglas McKay, contact a home of the Little Sisters of the Poor or one of the following vendors:

- Amazon.com
- Daughters of St. Paul
- St. Jude Shop, Havertown, Pennsylvania

Father McKay is chaplain at Holy Family Home, Philadelphia, PA. Our gratitude to Father McKay for allowing us to print a chapter of his book in this issue of *Serenity*!

Power made perfect in weakness

CHRISTIANITY IS FULL OF PARADOXES — Our Savior Jesus Christ became poor to enrich us by his poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). He taught that it is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35); that the poor and the persecuted are blessed (cf. Mt 5:3ff); and that the greatest among us is the one who makes himself the servant and the last of all (Mk 9:35). Ultimately, Christ laid down his own life to give us life (cf. Jn 10:10). He thus taught us that power reaches perfection in weakness (cf. 2 Cor 12:9).

Saint Paul captured the apparently paradoxical situations in which we so often find ourselves as Christians, “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true, as unknown and yet are well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything” (2 Cor 6:10).

“Power made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9): this phrase expresses the themes of this issue of *Serenity*. Saint Jeanne Jugan was a woman of great faith in a faithless age. She enriched the lives of others while remaining poor herself and made a lasting impact in the world, although by all accounts she was considered a “nobody.” We propose our foundress as a patron for our troubled times.

We also venture into the world of sickness and suffering in our coverage of the World Day of the Sick and an article entitled *Suffering and the Cycle of Compassion*. Inspired by the Gospel of Life, may we accept our own difficulties and sufferings, and respond to those of others, as graced opportunities to witness to the Truth and to release love into our world. 🌸

Saint Jeanne Jugan: patron for our troubled times

THESE ARE DIFFICULT TIMES FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH. In early March 2012 the Vatican's representative at the United Nations reported that more than 2.2 billion people worldwide are living under religious oppression. Even before freedom of conscience issues forced their way into the American news cycle in January, Pope Benedict had already expressed concern over what he perceives as growing religious intolerance in many parts of the world.

Speaking before the British Parliament in September 2010, our Holy Father voiced his concern that Christianity is being increasingly marginalized. "There are those who would advocate that the voice of religion be silenced, or at least relegated to the purely private sphere," he said. "And there are those who argue—paradoxically with the intention of eliminating discrimination—that Christians in public roles should be required at times to act against their conscience. These are worrying signs of a failure to appreciate not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square."

Homilists and bloggers alike are saying that it seems the odds are stacked against us. But if we take the long view, we realize that the odds have always been stacked against people of faith. This is not all bad, however — in a recent newspaper column New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan remarked (quoting Pope Paul VI), "When it's easy to be a Catholic, it's actually harder to be a good Catholic; and when it's hard to be a good Catholic, it's actually easier to be one."

Taking the long view also helps to make us more aware of the "vast cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1) surrounding us and support-



As a young girl Jeanne Jugan worked as a shepherdess on the bluffs overlooking the Bay of Cancale, where she must have often gazed out at Mont Saint Michel, a Benedictine abbey built on a small island in the bay in 966. The monastery was suppressed during the Revolution and used as a prison.

ing us as we struggle to remain “good Catholics” in difficult times. Whether it be the Apostles, the early martyrs or more recent figures like St. Edith Stein, the saints were faithful followers of Christ in season and out of season, even when it was hard. They are with us today to intercede for us.

Born into difficult times

Saint Jeanne Jugan might not be an obvious champion of religious liberty, yet she is an ideal patron for our times. Although born at the height of the French Revolution, it is unlikely that she took much interest in the tumultuous politics of her day. But as she ministered to the needs of those left in the Revolution’s wake, she was thoroughly involved in the circumstances of her time. Earlier this year Pope Benedict linked religious freedom to the vision of the Second Vatican Council “to proclaim the lofty grandeur of our human calling and the presence within us of a divine seed, and to

offer humanity sincere cooperation in building a sense of universal fraternity corresponding to this calling” (cf. *Guadium et Spes*, n. 3). Jeanne Jugan lived these words in all simplicity. Her life story and her courage can be an inspiration for us today.

We often say that Jeanne Jugan inherited the proud temperament and resolute character of the women of her birthplace. In fact, the Breton people were shaped by the rugged landscape and the sea that surrounded them, as well as by their distinct history. Beginning in the 4th century, Brittany was settled by immigrants from Great Britain. From the 5th century onward, the region was evangelized by monks from Wales who, upon their arrival, discovered a mix of Roman rites and Celtic practices. There were already some Roman bishops in place—men of learning and French culture—but they had little in common with the local people or the monks. Thanks to the rugged missionaries from Wales, Christianity put down strong roots in Brittany.

The Breton people remained independent from the French until 1532, when an act of perpetual union with France was signed. This agreement stipulated that they would retain much of their independence and would be exempt from taxation and military service outside Brittany. Until 1793 the Breton people spoke and were educated in their own language, which derived from Celtic languages, not the romance languages from which modern French is derived. The Revolution changed all this.

Jeanne Jugan was born at the height of this Revolution. Her biography remarks that she grew up in the midst of “harsh events which inevitably imprinted a certain gravity on her character.” It is well-known that Jeanne’s father was lost at sea when she was four years old; she was also profoundly affected by the war. In 1791, just a year before Jeanne’s birth, the Revolutionary government had passed a law requiring all priests in France to sign an oath of allegiance to the new constitution. The leaders of the new order also attempted to subject the people of Brittany to outside military conscription and taxation. An astounding seventy-five percent of Breton priests re-

fused to sign the Revolutionary oath; as a result many were martyred and the Church went underground. Unable to tolerate the new order, the peasant population of Brittany, together with royalists, staged a series of violent uprisings from 1791 – 1800. Such were the circumstances into which Jeanne Jugan was born.

We know that Jeanne was baptized in her parish church the day of her birth,

October 25, 1792, by a priest, formerly a monk of Mont Saint Michel, who had signed the constitutional oath. Eventually the church in Cancale was turned into a hospital, and then into a fodder-store for troops. Convents were suppressed. Jeanne and her siblings were home-schooled by their mother and a group of laywomen who clandestinely passed on the faith, members of the Third Order of St. John Eudes. Jeanne would later join this lay movement. On Easter Day 1802 the concordat between Bonaparte and Pope Pius VII was formally announced and public worship resumed; Jeanne was then ten years old. No doubt she was profoundly marked by those tumultuous years.

Even as peace was restored in France, anti-Catholic bias no doubt remained. We know that much later, Jeanne would counsel the young Little Sisters to be discreet when praying the rosary during their begging rounds in order to avoid arousing anger or ridicule.



A Street in Brittany, painted in Cancale in 1881

by Stanhope Alexander Forbes (used with permission of the Walker Gallery, Liverpool, England).

Jeanne lived to see the Franco-Prussian War (1869 – 1871) and its impact on our Congregation, and during this period she prayed fervently for the restoration of peace. Throughout her long life she maintained a keen interest in world events and prayed for the great needs and intentions of the Church and the world.

Jeanne's impact in a secular society

Perhaps what is most striking in the life of Saint Jeanne Jugan is that this simple woman with only a rudimentary education and no resources could rise above the circumstances in which she found herself to succeed in bringing a global mission of charity to birth. Despite all odds, Jeanne found herself part of a great renewal of women's religious communities in post-Revolutionary France. This rebirth is commonly attributed to the inability of the prevailing social and political order to adequately serve the needs of the poor, the sick and the uneducated. Religious communities like our Congregation filled the gap between the rhetoric of the new Republic and the harsh economic and social realities of the times.

Jeanne's impact exemplifies something Benedict XVI wrote in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*: "Love — caritas — will always prove necessary, even in the most just society.... There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbor is indispensable. The State which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person — every person — needs: namely, loving personal concern" (n. 28).

Through Jeanne's charism of hospitality, which has been translated across so many languages, our foundress continues to teach us that there is always a need for love; and that it is love — in the form of human solidarity and universal fraternity — that can transcend politics, religion and culture to proclaim the lofty grandeur of our human calling.

At the time of Jeanne's canonization in 2009, Mr. Pierre-Yves Mahieu, mayor of her hometown of Cancale, spoke of her contribution to the secular society that France embodies: "Secularism must be understood as the distinction between the political community and religions. But, as John Paul II pointed out, 'distinction does not mean ignorance! Secularity is not secularism! It is nothing other than respect for all beliefs on the part of the State that assures the free exercise of ritual, spiritual, cultural and charitable activities by communities of believers.'"¹

"Once this is understood," continued Mr. Mahieu, "we can realize how greatly men and women of faith — such as Jeanne Jugan — have left a deep imprint on the social fabric of our nation, namely health, solidarity, education and culture.... We must continue to work so that each person, whatever his or her culture or environment, may be given respect. To each person is due attention stamped with dignity and consideration. In this way is manifested the real degree of civilization of any human organization. That is why we must remain vigilant. Our worth is never more than that of our heart. Purity and strength gave immeasurable value to that of Jeanne Jugan ... Love goes forward into eternity."

"Saint Jeanne Jugan: advocate for the needy and neglected, woman of prophetic intuition, promoter of the culture of life and patron for our troubled times, pray for us!" 🙏

¹ John Paul II, Address to the Diplomatic Corps for the traditional exchange of New Year Greetings, January 12, 2004.

A lily of the Blessed Sacrament

by Rev. Douglas McKay,
chaplain, Holy Family Home, Philadelphia

AT THE NURSE'S STATION SAT 100-YEAR-OLD LILLIAN in her wheelchair. Holding a cookie, she said, "Here, you take this and eat it." Then she took her milky drink. "Take this, too, and drink it," she said. "'Tis good for you, it 'tis."

As I bit the cookie, she added, "Quick, wash it down." I lifted the plastic cup to my lips.

"Stop!" the nurse shouted. She took the drink from me and gave it back to Lillian, saying, "Don't give your medicine to the priest."

"Oh, 'tis you, Fadder?"

"Áye, it 'tis," I said, imitating her brogue.

"Oh my, I'm sorry!" she said, making the sign of the cross. "I can't hear so good neither."

"Now drink your medicine," the nurse said.

"What is it ye say?" she asked, bending her ear. "I don't hear so good neither."

"You hear me, Dilly Lilly. Drink it! It's good for you," she said in her ear.

"Then ye drink it. If 'tis good for me, 'tis good for you."

"It's your medicine, not mine; you'll die if you don't drink it."

"Now Lillian," I pleaded, "Offer it up to Jesus."

"What 'tis it you say, Fadder?"

"Give it to Jesus," I said in her ear.

"Give it to Jesus?" ... "What kind of Roman Catholic do ye think I am? I'll never give anything like that to the Lord. Never!"



“But you gave it to me, His priest.”

“I didn’t know ‘twas you; forgive me Fadder, for I have sinned.”

I made the sign of the cross over her saying, “Now for your penance, drink your medicine.”

“What ‘tis it ye say?”

I took the medicine from the nurse and gave it to Lillian. “*Drink your penance.*” I shouted. She finally gulped it down.

“Yuck, I never had a penance like that one before.” Walking away, I overheard her tell the nurse. “He’s a strict one, he is, but I thank God for him, because he gave us real food and drink for our souls — unlike your medicine — so we’ll never die.”

Lillian was known for her holiness. Even into her eighties, she still took buses and cabs to visit the shrines. She spent days and nights in churches, fasting before the Blessed Sacrament. In the chapel at Holy Family Home, it would be a rare occasion for anyone, except herself, to be alone with the Eucharistic Lord because she was there most of the time. She parked her wheelchair at the foot of the alter, gazed at the golden tabernacle, and prayed her sapphire rosary for hours and hours.

Every Saturday after Mass, Lillian came to confession. One day, she said, “Oh God of second chances and new beginnings, here I am again.”

“How are you?”

“Miserable! I don’t know why the good God puts up with me.”

“Because He loves you.”

“He must to put up with the likes of me.”

“Well, Lillian, look at the likes of me, and He made me a priest anyway.”

“O Fadder, He loves His priests.”

“He must to put up with the likes of me.”

After the absolution, Lillian blessed me. She held her rosary in her shaky left hand and her steady right hand was on my bowed head, saying “O priest of the Blessed Sacrament, ye are truly blessed. In heaven our dear Lord will put His unfading crown of glory on yer royal head. Like the tabernacle, it will glitter before the heavenly court in the holy envy of all His radiant angels. O priest of the Blessed Sacrament!” Then taking my hands, she kissed them. Looking deeply into my eyes, she continued. “Thank ye, Jesus, for absolving me; especially for giving me yourself in the Blessed Sacrament, real medicine, so I’ll never die.”

One day in her room, she said, “Fadder, always remember this.” With her thumb and index finger, she drew a line across her neck.

“Remember what?” I asked.

“Your collar. Remember what it means.”

“What?”

“It means you’re a priest forever. And never forget that without the priest there’s no Blessed Sacrament. They go together like the two hearts of Jesus and Mary.”

“I know.” I said. Poking her temples with her index fingers, she said, “Know Mary, know Jesus.” Continuing her wisdom, she shook her head from side-to-side and added, “No Mary, no Jesus; no Jesus, no priest; no priest, no Blessed Sacrament.”

On Lillian’s birthday, we offered Mass for her intentions. After the entrance hymn, I took the hand-microphone down to her saying,

“Happy Birthday!”

“What is it?” she asked, bending her ear.

“It’s your birthday! I exclaimed. “How do you feel being 101?”

“I don’t feel!” she shouted, “My age sounds like a bad tempera-
ture. Now, Fadder, git on with it.”

“With what?”

“The Mass, what else.”

“OK.” For our Communion meditation, we sang her favorite hymn: *Come to the banquet I have made./ Take the bread and the wine I will give you./ Body and blood, I will give you./ My life for the world I will give....*

At the age of 102, Lillian became seriously ill. For months she lingered in her sickness. We prayed for the Lord to take her home. We couldn’t understand the divine delay. During the last week of her life, she could no longer eat and had to receive nourishment intravenously to prevent dehydration and to ease her pain. On the Fourth Sunday of Easter after I anointed her, I realized that this holy woman literally lived with the Blessed Sacrament. It was said of her that she was an all-year-round Easter lily before the tabernacle....

Well, then, I thought, if Lillian can’t be with the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel, then I’ll just bring the Blessed Sacrament to be with Lillian in her room. Why didn’t I think of this before, I wondered.... I brought the Blessed Sacrament to her room in that sacred vessel [the pyx] that I like referring to as my little movable tabernacle.... Leaning over her body, I placed the pyx containing the Blessed Sacrament on her chest. Suddenly, at that precise instant, Gabriel’s trumpet sounded for her. Even before I could bless myself, she took a yawning breath and slowly exhaled, never to breathe again. I smelled a sweet garden around her body, and I saw a golden aura around her face.... Lillian parted from us, just as she lived, as a lily of the Blessed Sacrament. 🌸

Lillian, A Lily of the Blessed Sacrament, is an excerpted chapter from Father McKay’s book, *Heaven’s Homecoming*, a collection of eulogistic stories compiled during his long tenure as chaplain of Holy Family Home, Philadelphia. For information on obtaining Father’s book please check out the inside front cover.



The spirit of Lourdes

Residents in Noumea, New Caledonia (above) and Taipei, Taiwan (bottom) receive a Eucharistic blessing during World Day of the Sick celebrations. Middle photo: Rev. Robert Dunn anoints the Residents during a Lourdes celebration at Jeanne Jugan Residence, Bronx, New York.



Your faith has saved you: World Day of the Sick

EMULATING THE TRADITIONAL DEVOTIONS AT LOURDES, many of our homes mark the annual World Day of the Sick on February 11th with celebrations of the Anointing of the Sick and rosary or Eucharistic processions. This year Little Sisters from several east coast homes had the opportunity to attend a conference for health care workers and medical professionals sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers and the archdiocese of Philadelphia, and held at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania.

Visiting from Rome, Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, led the day and gave the morning's key note presentation. The archbishop spoke of the aims of the World Day of the Sick and Pope Benedict's reference to the Church's health care ministry in each of his encyclicals.

Most notable among these references is a passage from the Pope's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, in which he asserts that works of charity are an integral part of the Church's mission: "As ... the Church spread further afield, the exercise of charity became established as one of her essential activities, along with the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word: love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel" (n. 22).

Later in the day Dr. John Haas, of the National Catholic Bioethics Center, completed this thought when he emphasized that not only can the Church *not* carry out works of charity, by her very nature she *may not limit* her service to Catholics alone. These insights could not have been more relevant in light of our current national debate.

This year's theme for World Day of the Sick focused on the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick. We asked two of our chaplains to share their reflections on the Anointing of the Sick.

From the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, healing was a part of the message of the Gospel. In the letter of St. James, we are told that if anyone is sick, they should call for the priests of the Church who will anoint them with oil and lay hands upon them. In the Sacrament of the Anointing, this important work continues.

Prior to the reforms of Vatican II, "Extreme Unction" was the last Sacrament of life. The reforms extended this ministry of anointing to all in need of healing.

In Lourdes, those who are in need are called malades [French for "the sick"]. It is a word that covers all conditions—chronic, acute, disabled, and the aged. For the past couple of years, it is been my privilege to be in that sanctuary twice a year. Every May, the Order of Malta sponsors a plane and takes people with various needs to the Grotto. During the summer, the Malta Youth Pilgrimage assists pilgrims throughout the world who come to bathe in the waters given to us by God through Mary. At the heart of any pilgrimage to this shrine is the Anointing of the Sick. And, yes, for over 150 years, people have found healing—physical and spiritual.

In the homes run by the Little Sisters of the Poor, the sacrament of Anointing is administered frequently. The elderly are not necessarily infirm, but as one of our prayers puts it so well, they "have grown weak under the burden of years." The Sacrament of Anointing is a grace of God to see them through these years and to help them carry that burden. It is a supernatural remedy for a very natural condition. It is not magic because it requires faith. Often the greatest miracle is the vision to see God's own help in the care of the Sisters and staff of these homes. As Mary laid the newborn Christ in the manger, as St. Jeanne Jugan placed the first elderly woman in her own bed, so in our homes those in need of care—physical and spiritual—are lovingly taken in.

Through the intercession of our Lady of Lourdes, we pray that the ministry of healing the whole person will continue strongly through the dedication of so many.

– Rev. Robert Dunn, Jeanne Jugan Residence, Bronx, New York

Since 1992, the Catholic Church has celebrated World Day of the Sick on February 11 – the day on which we commemorate the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. World Day of the Sick has three themes: it reminds us to pray for the sick, it invites us to reflect on and respond to human suffering, and it recognizes and honors all persons who work in health care and serve as caregivers.

2012 marked the twentieth anniversary of this celebration. Its theme: “Stand up and go; your faith has saved you” (LK 17:19). In his message for the day this year, the Holy Father wrote this:

In the ... weak and sick life, a Christian expresses an important aspect of his or her gospel witness: following the example of Christ, who bent down before ... sufferings ... in order to heal them.... I wish to encourage (the) sick ... and the suffering always to find a safe anchor in faith, nourished by listening to the Word of God, by personal prayer, and by the sacraments.

The sacrament most intimately connected with the sick, of course, is the Sacrament of the Sick, or the Sacrament of Anointing. As a sacrament, it is a “guaranteed” encounter with God. It gives us God’s grace; specifically, through the Holy Spirit, the Sacrament of the Sick gives healing and renews our faith in God, strengthening us against temptations to discouragement, despair, and anguish.

Here at the Sacred Heart Home in Oregon, OH (as in many homes of the Little Sisters of the Poor, I would imagine), we celebrated the Sacrament of the Sick at Mass on Saturday, February 11. As presider at this Mass, I want to express my humility at anointing those elderly whose faces reflected their conviction that God was present. As one who was anointed (I have Multiple Sclerosis), I want to express my hope for spiritual and physical healing, but also my prayer that all of us anointed be able to accept – even embrace – the will of God in our lives. It is, after all, our faith that will save us.

– Rev. Joseph Weigman, Sacred Heart Home, Oregon, Ohio



Litany of Saint

Lord, have mercy. R/ Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy, Christ, hear us.

R/ Christ, graciously hear us.

God, the Father in Heaven, R/ have mercy on us.

God, the Son, Redeemer of the world, R/ have mercy on us.

God the Holy Spirit, R/ have mercy on us.

Holy Trinity, one God, R/ have mercy on us.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, R/ * pray for us.

Saint Joseph, *

Saint John Eudes, *

Saint John of God, *

Saint Jeanne Jugan, *

Sister Mary of the Cross, *

Foundress and mother of the Little Sisters, *

Selfless servant at Saint-Servan, *

Faithful daughter of the Church, *

Holy woman of humble heart, *

Pillar of spiritual strength and courage, *

Patient soul awaiting God's call, *

Talented organizer for God's work, *

One united with the poor, *

Special attendant to the sick, *

Comforter to the lonely, *

Consoler to the suffering, *

Companion to the dying, *

Apostle of the aged and abandoned, *

Advocate for the needy and neglected, *

Friend to the forgotten and forsaken, *

Rescuer of the distressed and destitute, *

Helper of the homeless and widowed, *

Instrument of healing and mercy, *

Agent of change and transformation, *

Virgin consecrated to the Lord's service, *

Beloved beggar of God's Providence, *

Model of divine abandonment, *



Saint Jeanne Jugan

Quiet victim of injustice, *
Beacon of the Beatitudes, *
Living light of God's love, *
Disciple of living faith, *
Herald of undying hope, *
Vessel of burning charity, *
Great lover of the treasure of poverty, *
Protector of the precious jewel of chastity, *
Silent witness to evangelical obedience, *
Visible sign of gracious hospitality, *
Paradigm of care and concern, *
Grateful recipient of untold graces, *
Guide to those in formation, *
Woman of prophetic intuition, *
Inspiration to volunteers, *
Promoter of the culture of life, *
Patron for our troubled times. *

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world.
Spare us, O Lord.

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world,
Graciously hear us, O Lord.

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world,
Have mercy on us.

Pray for us, Saint Jeanne Jugan

That we may be worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray.

God our Father, You have promised Your Kingdom to those who are willing to serve the poor and those in need. Help us to follow the way of Saint Jeanne Jugan with confidence so that by her prayers we may come to know your eternal glory. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Litany of Saint Jeanne Jugan was composed by Michael Wick, executive director of the Institute on Religious Life.

“Do not fear asking for and accepting help.
Your dependency can be an occasion of grace
both for yourself and for others.”



Suffering and the cycle of compassion

SEVERAL YEARS AGO A GROUP OF LITTLE SISTERS had the opportunity to interview Helen M. Alvaré, a well-known figure in Catholic and pro-life circles. At the time she was an associate professor at Catholic University's Columbus School of Law (she is now at George Mason University). Prior to that, Helen had served the U.S. Bishops Conference for over a decade, dedicating her keen intellect and prodigious energies to many pro-life causes. We were excited about the opportunity to meet Helen and were considering the direction our interview should take when we met another prominent pro-life figure, Mother Agnes Mary Donovan, S.V., at the annual Vigil for Life in Washington. We told Mother Agnes about our upcoming encounter and asked her what she thought we should ask Prof. Alvaré. Mother Agnes responded without hesitation: "Ask her what she would consider the single most compelling argument against euthanasia."

A few days later we did exactly that—and we were quite surprised with Prof. Alvaré's answer! Her "argument" was neither academic nor legal, but completely heartfelt. "It is not so much an argument, as a plea for conversion to the law of love," she explained, asserting that the "argument" against euthanasia must be based on fighting the decision that somebody's life is not worth continuing because of its circumstances, or that suffering can make an individual's life less than a life of human dignity. The greatest deterrent to euthanasia, she suggested, is to develop daily behaviors, "habits of the heart," that will enable us "to respond to any human being in any circumstance as we would wish to be treated, to love others as we ourselves wish to be loved."

Helen Alvaré's "argument" against euthanasia was a simple but challenging "plea for the practice of the daily habit of love, because unless you do that with respect to all persons, it is very hard to do it with respect to somebody who may be suffering and even begging to be set free of this life." "The hardest work, not only with respect to euthanasia but also with respect to abortion," she concluded, "has to do with asking people just to stop and slow down long enough to treat other persons with common respect, dignity and love." Responding compassionately to another human being's cry for help in the face of suffering, Prof. Alvaré asserted, "is more about you than it is about them in many ways; but then it comes back to both of you."

Alvaré's words that day were so powerful that her interviewers never forgot them; yet they were not entirely original (but this merely gives witness to the fact that Helen is a true woman of the Church). From Blessed John Paul II, to Pope Benedict and those currently on the front lines of the battle against assisted suicide and euthanasia, over and over we have heard this "plea" for daily habits of love that will train us to accompany the sick and dying with compassion, rather than turning our backs on them (cf. Isaiah 58:7).

In *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II contrasted euthanasia with "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" (*Evangelium Vitae*, n. 67).

Pope Benedict XVI addressed the problem of suffering and the challenges it poses to others in his encyclical on hope, *Spe Salvi*: "The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it in-



wardly through ‘com-passion’ is a cruel and inhuman society.... The individual cannot accept another’s suffering unless he personally is able to find meaning in suffering.... To accept the ‘other’ who suffers, means that I take up his suffering in such a way that it becomes mine also. Because it has now become a shared suffering, though, in which another person is present, this suffering is penetrated by the light of love. The Latin word con-solatio, ‘consolation,’ expresses this beautifully. It suggests being with the other in his solitude, so that it ceases to be solitude” (*Spe Salvi*, n. 38).

And most recently, last year the US. Bishops published a statement on physician assisted suicide in which they echoed our Holy Father’s insights: “Today ... many people fear the dying process. They are afraid of being kept alive past life’s natural limits by burdensome medical technology. They fear experiencing intolerable pain and suffering, losing control over bodily functions, or lingering with severe dementia. They worry about being abandoned or becoming a burden on others. Our society can be judged by how we respond to these fears. A caring community devotes more attention, not less, to members facing the most vulnerable times in their lives. When people are tempted to see their own lives as diminished in value



or meaning, they most need the love and assistance of others to assure them of their inherent worth” (*To Live Each Day with Dignity*).

The goal of creating more caring communities has never been more urgent. The archdiocese of Boston has recently mounted a vigorous campaign called *Suicide Is Always a Tragedy*, against a ballot initiative aimed at legalizing physician assisted suicide in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. During a webinar designed to prepare the

faithful to fight this initiative, one pastor asked what individual parishes can do to support the Church’s efforts. The response was to strengthen outreach to those who may be ill or house-bound, so that they will not feel isolated and tempted to despair. The solution, in other words, is to create truly caring communities that will leave no one to suffer alone.

The benefit of caring individuals and communities for those receiving the care is obvious. But caregivers have something to gain as well. In his parable of the Last Judgment, Christ is clear about what is at stake in serving our neighbor. He will “separate them one from another,” saying to those on his right, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me. But to those on his left...” (Matthew 25:31–46).

While our ultimate destiny is not something about which we should be indifferent, we should be convinced that compassion and solidarity can positively impact us every day of our lives. During World Youth Day in Madrid, Pope Benedict spent time with a group of sick and disabled youth and their families. “In a mysterious way,” he told them, the presence of the sick “awakens in our often hardened hearts a tenderness which opens us to salvation.”

In many ways, caring for others helps us to mature as persons and rise above ourselves. In her book on aging, popular author Mary Pipher wrote that in caring for their elders, younger people “get the chance to grow up and truly be adults.” Blessed John Paul II said something very similar at a gathering with older persons in 1980 when he told them that in accepting help they allow others to meet Christ in them. “That, my dear elder people, is the reward you give to those for whom you dislike being a burden. You are the occasion for them to meet the Lord, the opportunity to outgrow themselves.”

In 1999 the U.S. Bishops published a pastoral letter on aging entitled *Blessings of Age*. In it they encouraged seniors not to be disheartened by the declining independence that often accompanies the later years. “There is nothing wrong with being dependent on others,” they wrote. “Interdependence, not independence, is the true gospel value. From birth to death, no one is ever truly independent. All of us need each other, more at certain times than at others. Do not fear asking for and accepting help. Your dependency can be an occasion of grace both for yourself and for others.” Permitting others to enter the sacred space of our lives — allowing the façade of self-sufficiency that often hides our adult vulnerabilities to fall — enables others to learn from our experiences and to step out of their own self-absorption to expand the limits of their hearts.

Contemporary culture puts such emphasis on personal autonomy that our inherent relatedness to one another often goes unrecognized. But the truth is that God created us in his image — in the image of Trinitarian Love — as social beings. “Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness,” we read in Genesis (1:26).

God created woman as a companion for man, for it was “not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). The Scriptures thus reveal to us the profound reality that we were created to need one another.

Aside from the marital relationship, there may be no more intense moment of interpersonal encounter than in a situation of physical disability or serious illness. When are we needier or more vulnerable, than when our physical or mental health fails us and we find ourselves on a sick bed, dependent on the care of others? Father José Granados, a member of the Disciples of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, has reflected on this question in light of John Paul II’s theology of the body. He writes that through the body, suffering opens the individual to the world “in the form of vulnerability,” guiding us “to solidarity with our fellow men: the body becomes a place of communion by means of compassion.”¹

Father Granados writes that when we see the suffering of the other we are moved to compassion. “Compassion,” he says, “is the adequate answer to the call of suffering, an identification with the suffering person that awakens suffering in us.” As together we ask the ultimate question, “Why?,” this suffering with our neighbor, “flesh of our flesh,” reawakens in us the awareness of our relation to God as our creator; this makes us more conscious of our human dignity. At the same time, as the one who is suffering realizes that someone else cares for him and wishes to suffer with him, he becomes more aware of his own worth and dignity. Granados refers to this as the “cycle of compassion.” Through it both persons — the one who is in need and the one who cares for him — find that suffering carries a blessing because it opens them up to a profound encounter with God.

This interpersonal concept of suffering echoes the thought of John Paul II in his work, *On the Christian Meaning of Suffering (Salvific Doloris)*. Suffering is present in our human world, he wrote, “to unleash love in the human person, that unselfish gift of one’s ‘I’ on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer.” John Paul wrote that the world of human suffering calls for another world—the world of human love. “In a certain sense man owes to suffering that



unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions. The person who is a ‘neighbor’ cannot indifferently pass by the suffering of another.... He must ‘stop,’ ‘sympathize,’ just like the Samaritan of the Gospel parable” (S.D., n. 29).

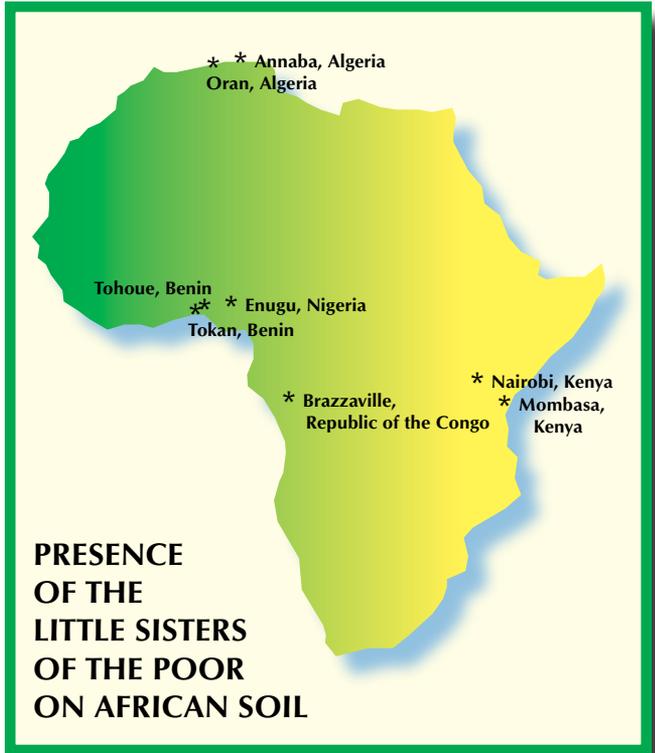
Ultimately the antidote for assisted suicide and euthanasia lies in this “cycle of compassion.” It is up to you and me to stop, pay attention to the other and allow our love to be unleashed in compassion. In this way those of us who are strong may realize our human dignity by embracing the call to solidarity. At the same time, through the compassion they are shown, those who are weak will realize their dignity as children of God worthy of love, respect and care. Prof. Alvaré put it so simply: Compassion is more about you than it is about them; but then it comes back to both of you. As we continue in our struggle to uphold human dignity in the face of serious threats such as assisted suicide and euthanasia, may we be inspired by this simple truth. 🌸

¹ Granados, José, *Towards a Theology of the Suffering Body*. *Communio* 33 (Winter 2006).

Papal joy!

Below: the Little Sisters, novices and postulants of our community in Tokan, a village in the diocese of Cotonou, gather around the cornerstone just blessed by Pope Benedict XVI.

Opposite page: Before Mass the cornerstone for the new home, which will be named after Pope Benedict to commemorate his visit, sits in the sanctuary beside a statue of the Virgin and Child carved by a Beninese artist.



All of Africa witnessed it! Benedict XVI blesses cornerstone

IN MARCH 2010 OUR LITTLE SISTERS in the African nation of Benin were thrilled when the land on which the second home in this country will be built was blessed. As they recount, their excitement rose to a whole new level last November when Pope Benedict XVI blessed the cornerstone of the new home during his pastoral visit to Africa.

“Sunday, November 20th, all of Benin was heading towards the Amitié Stadium. We did not want to miss this great encounter with the Holy Father! ... After Communion, while the choir was singing, Pope Benedict XVI gave the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus*, to the representatives of the Episcopal Councils who were all present. Immediately after the Angelus, an announcement was made in the stadium: ‘The Holy Father will now give the final

blessing, and at the same time he will bless the foundation stone of the new construction of the Little Sisters of the Poor in the diocese of Porto Novo.’ The whole of Africa is thus a witness to it!

“It was with a certain amount of nostalgia, but our hearts filled with joy, that we said good-bye to the Holy Father.... It is the work of each and every one to build a world of reconciliation, justice and peace, and even in our communities in Africa, we have our part to play.” 🌸



Spain and Portugal welcome Mother General

SHE WAS BORN IN THE U.S.A. and has spent the better part of her life in France, but for two weeks last fall, Mother General Celine de la Visitation was Spanish, and then Portuguese ... or maybe a little of both! Mother's trip began in Barcelona the evening of November 5th. It was then on to Seville and Madrid, with stops in Talavera and Los Molinos. Mother General and her companion, a Spanish member of the General Council, also visited our two homes in Portugal, in the cities of Porto and Lisbon.

The needs of our vast worldwide religious family were confided to Our Lady during visits to the Marian Shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat in Catalonia, and the more famous shrine of Fatima, located a short drive from Lisbon.

At each stop along the way she was warmly greeted by the Little Sisters and Residents, who did their best to share their local culture, while also showing off their French and English language skills!

Filled with encounters of various kinds, Mother's time in Spain and Portugal passed all too quickly. Then it was on to Rome for a series of meetings with Vatican officials! 🌸





Opposite page: A Resident in traditional costume presents Mother General with flowers from the garden in Porto, Portugal.

Above: In Seville, Mother Celine (center) meets a group of young volunteers.

Right: Two Residents dressed in regional costumes—one with a basket atop her head!—wait to greet Mother General in Lisbon.



Left: At each stop along the way Mother General greeted the Residents and presented them with little gifts, as she did here in Los Molinos, on the outskirts of Madrid.



Never too old to take a stand

At ninety years old, Leland Schneider, with his wife a Resident in our home in Cincinnati, Ohio, often speaks and editorializes about what he sees as the social ills in our country today. He tells us, "As I look back to my early days, life was relatively simple and for most of us, faith, family and country were the cherished values. God blessed us with seven beautiful children and our time passed between a rich home life and much involvement in the parish schools. But beginning in the mid sixties, there began to be a change in our society that gradually involved insidious attacks on areas such as faith, family, sexuality and even life itself. Our own family was not exempt. Secularism, political confusion and a culture of drugs were threatening the very fabric of our society. As a Secular Franciscan, a public school teacher and a war veteran, I could see this very clearly, as could my gifted wife, a former teacher and experienced nurse. So we tried to pass on to our children the Christian values we cherished. Now with our sophisticated technology and philosophies where often God has no place, we are left facing a culture of death and its dire effects. Yet, now as always 'In God is our trust' and here at the Little Sisters in our final years of life, we continue as best we can to uphold and live the basic truths of our faith, family and country in a 'Nation under God' and to bring before him in prayer and supplication our need for his gracious help at this time." 🌸

Young and old unite for Life

“THE TEMPERATURE WAS COLD; the ground was wet; but our hearts were warm; and our spirits rejoiced.” This reflection from our Little Sisters in Scranton, Pennsylvania describes their experience on January 20th as they, together with Residents and friends, young and old alike, joined students from nearby Marywood University and residents and staff from St. Joseph’s Center for a March for Life across the Marywood campus. The event, which kicked off a “Pro-Life weekend” at our home, has become an annual tradition. The weekend’s pro-life activities also included veneration of the traveling mission image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Our Sisters in Washington hosted over a hundred youth from Indiana who come every year for the National March for Life. Our delegation of Little Sisters and postulants is pictured during the March in our nation’s capital. 🌸



Vocations, the Gift of the Love of God

WE ARE LOVED BY GOD even “before” we come into existence! Moved solely by his unconditional love, he created us “not ... out of existing things” (cf. 2 Macc 7:28), to bring us into full communion with him....

The profound truth of our existence is thus contained in this surprising mystery: every creature, and in particular every human person, is the fruit of God’s thought and an act of his love, a love that is boundless, faithful and everlasting (cf. Jer 31:3). The discovery of this reality is what truly and profoundly changes our lives. In a famous page of the Confessions, Saint Augustine expresses with great force his discovery of God, supreme beauty and supreme love, a God who was always close to him, and to whom he at last opened his mind and heart to be transformed: “Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you.” ... With these images, the Saint of Hippo seeks to describe the ineffable mystery of his encounter with God, with God’s love that transforms all of life.

It is a love that is limitless and that precedes us, sustains us and calls us along the path of life, a love rooted in an absolutely free gift of God.... Every specific vocation is in fact born of the initiative of God; it is a gift of the Love of God! He is the One who takes the “first step”, and not because he has found something good in us, but because of the presence of his own love “poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5).

*– from the message of Pope Benedict XVI
for the 49th World Day of Prayer for Vocations,
April 29, 2012*

**PLEASE JOIN US IN PRAYING FOR VOCATIONS
ON APRIL 29!**

A woman wearing a white habit and glasses is smiling and holding a lit candle. The background is a bright blue sky with white clouds. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

***T*he profound truth
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The discovery of this reality
is what truly and profoundly
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For more information about the Little Sisters of the Poor visit:

- <http://www.littlesistersofthepoor.org> (U.S.A.)
- <http://www.littlesistersofthepoor.org.au> (Oceania)
- <http://www.lspkorea.com> (South Korea)
- <http://www.lspw.org> (Taiwan)

Serenity

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