

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
CELEBRATION OF THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE LITTLE SISTERS OF THE POOR IN AMERICA
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 10, 2019
SAINT MARTIN HOME, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND**

My Dear Friends in Christ,

I am very happy to be with you to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Little Sisters of the Poor in America. I thank your Superior, Sister Joseph Caroline, and Sr. Roberta Francis, for their kind invitation and for their help in preparing for this liturgy. I have traveled all over the United States to be with the Little Sisters of the Poor and their residents; they have a special place in my heart. As a priest of the Archdiocese of Rennes and growing up in San Malo, hailing from that place where Saint Jeanne Jugan began her marvelous work, I have a fondness for the Little Sisters who faithfully cared for my own mother.

How happy I am that the good work that Saint Jeanne Jugan spread from France to the United States one hundred fifty years ago! Although the first houses in the United States were founded in Brooklyn, Cincinnati, and New Orleans, the presence of the Little Sisters in Baltimore soon followed. It is truly an honor to be here.

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to this country, I greet you in his name and express his paternal affection for all gathered here and assure you of his spiritual closeness and prayers. You are especially dear to him. Your work among the poor, especially the elderly poor, your solidarity with them, and your accompaniment of them embody how Pope Francis is calling the whole Church to proclaim the joy of the Gospel!

Today, our readings are taken not from the Lenten Readings of the Day but from the Proper Readings for the Feast of St. Jeanne Jugan; nevertheless, the readings capture something of the spirituality of Lent. The first reading, taken from the prophet Isaiah, speaks of the type of fasting that the Lord desires: *Is not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wander with shelter, when you see the naked to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

This is exactly the type of fasting that Saint Jeanne Jugan practiced. Mere fasting from food was not enough. Her heart, already sensitive to the ways of the Lord and imbued with the spirituality of St. John Eudes, was moved with compassion when she saw an elderly blind woman on the streets. She brought her home, and so the work began. In God's hands and prompted by the Holy Spirit, the work of Jeanne Jugan grew. It was not enough for her to simply care for the poor or beg for the poor, the community which she founded (and you are the heirs to her work) was to show solidarity with the poor, to live with them and share in their life. This is the type of fasting and offering that is truly pleasing to the Lord.

This is the type of Church our Holy Father wants: a Church of the Poor and a Church for the Poor. It is not enough to merely carry out corporal works, like some social service agency; rather, you, following in the footsteps of Jeanne Jugan, must see Christ in the least of your brothers and sisters, and love Him in the elderly poor. To be a Church for the Poor means seeking union with Christ *and* loving those whom Christ loved. Each of us must desire to have, in the words of St. John Eudes, "one life, one heart, one soul, and one will with Jesus," which necessarily means loving those whom Jesus loved – the little ones and the poor.

Jesus showed the depths of His love in His willingness to undergo His Passion. Our second reading, taken from the First Letter of Saint John, reminds us: *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.* Saint Jeanne Jugan's life was immersed in the Mystery of the Cross. She was known to pray devoutly the Stations of the Cross, to spend long hours in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, and to participate in the Eucharistic Sacrifice frequently and to receive Jesus in Holy Communion. Even her name in religion – Sister Mary of the Cross – recognizes her desire for union with the Crucified One, who laid down his life for us. Her love for the poor flowed from her love for Jesus, who died in poverty. She understood what it meant to lay down her life for others and *to see a brother and sister in need* and to act with compassion. She showed the world in a very short period of time, what it was to *not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

To lay down one's life for others and to embrace the cross wholeheartedly involves being humble and even humiliated. The Redeemer, St. Paul tells us, *humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even death on a Cross.* Certainly, Jeanne Jugan endured many humiliations in life – small ones, when people rejected her pleas for alms, and big ones, when Marie Jamet was made Superior and she was

set aside. Spending the last twenty-seven years of her life at the Motherhouse, out of sight and out of mind, she accepted her Cross without complaint, leaving us a wonderful witness of the Christian way of life. Though she spoke mostly by deeds than words, she reminds us that the real measure of sanctity is humility, when she writes: "Be little, stay little! Keep the spirit of humility, of littleness! If we begin to consider ourselves as something, the Congregation would no longer cause God to be honored and we would fail!"

Jesus honored the Father by being humble and obedient. Jeanne Jugan and the Little Sisters of the Poor glorify God in their littleness, in their poverty, and in their care for the poor. In a world that tends to value people based on efficiency and productivity, there is a great danger – a risk to the life and dignity of the human person, especially of the elderly poor, who maybe are not as productive or efficient as they once were. Elderly people today want to be respected, valued, and loved, not for what they do but for who they are. The Homes of the Little Sisters of the Poor throughout the world, but especially in this country where many people have great wealth, are a reminder to the elderly poor that they matter. They are essential. Here they learn to overcome the poverty of loneliness, to deepen their life of faith, and to give others an example of perseverance in the midst of difficulties. The homes of the Little Sisters of the Poor provide what no government or social service agency can provide: the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus. This is the remedy for the worldly attitudes that tend to dominate and dehumanize.

The Beatitudes, which we heard in the Gospel, turn the values of this world on their head! The Beatitudes begin with *Blessed are the Poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*. The key to our happiness is not money or productivity; rather, it is union with God Himself. The Rule of the Little Sisters of the Poor rightly invites us "to share in the beatitude of spiritual poverty, leading to that complete dispossession which commits a soul to God."

How many people today see poverty only as a loss! In contrast, St. Jeanne Jugan leads us to see it as an opportunity to be open to Divine Providence. She wrote: "It is so beautiful to be poor, to have nothing, and to await all from God." Indeed, poverty of spirit opens us to the Transcendence of God, the source our life, our hope, and our destiny. How different is the message of Saint Jeanne Jugan from our modern slogans! She tells us be little, be humble, be poor, share with your brothers and sisters! Her message is none other than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is this type of Christianity that attracts and evangelizes. Think not only of how many residents

want to be in the homes of the Little Sisters but how many volunteers and benefactors, young and old, are drawn to their homes, because here they can truly live the Gospel, loving their brothers and sisters, not merely in words, but in action and in truth. I am confident that God will not forget the good deeds of the Little Sisters of the Poor, their benefactors, and their volunteers

While the world tells us that we need to do more, make more money, make a name for ourselves and get ahead, Saint Jeanne Jugan teaches us that we need to rely on Divine Providence ... and occasionally on Saint Joseph. There is a famous story that when the house in Angers was first being founded, there was no butter for some elderly residents. She apparently said, "But this is the land of butter! Why on earth don't you ask Saint Joseph?" She simply lit a candle by his statue and put empty butter dishes there with a sign: "Good Saint Joseph, send us butter for our old folk!" Within a few days, she had her butter.

Life does not need to be complicated. We need to have a simple, humble faith in God and to trust in Divine Providence. We are privileged not only to have witnessed all that Divine Providence has wrought through the Little Sisters of the Poor over these past one hundred and fifty years, but also to be called to continue the mission started by Saint Jeanne Jugan. Let us abandon ourselves to Divine Providence, so that the work of the Saint Martin Home and the Little Sisters may continue for one hundred and fifty more years!