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Homily St. Joseph's Day Mass

Little Sisters of the Poor
Jeanne Jugan Center
March 19, 2009

Earlier this year the Little Sisters of the Poor received the exciting news that their foundress, Blessed Jeanne Jugan, would be canonized by Pope Benedict XVI this coming October. For the sisters and their many friends worldwide the announcement was not really a surprise. For generations they have reverently believed in the saintly qualities of this extraordinary woman from Brittany who brought life and spirit to their fledgling community. Now, the Church, having studied the results of all the rigorous examinations demanded by the canonization process, will affirm our popular belief that Jeanne Jugan is indeed a saint worthy of the praise and adulation we give to Joan of Arc, Bernadette Soubierius, Therese of Lixieux and all those other French women saints whose lives gave such sterling witness to Christ-like living.

1792 was one of those truly terrible years in the history of France. The French Revolution had degenerated into a Reign of Terror best remembered for its senseless and bloody excesses. Thousands of innocent people, often in the wrong place at the wrong time, went to the guillotine; among them many priests who, by popular opinion, had over-identified themselves with the regime of Louis XVI. The king himself was arrested and in January of the following year he too was guillotined. Lawlessness was rampant, the economy collapsed, the pent-up fury of the masses under the banner of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity." (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*) was unleashed against all that reminded them of the repression associated with the privileged classes which, unfortunately, included the Church.

At this time of national chaos, far away from the barricaded streets of Paris, on October 25th, 1792 in a tiny thatched cottage overlooking the lovely bay of Cancale in Brittany, Jeanne Jugan was born. Her father, Joseph, was a fisherman with serious health problems and he was lost at sea before Jeanne was four years old. Her impoverished mother Marie, with eight children to feed, was forced to become a laundress and, as often happens in poverty-stricken families, the children too had to fend for themselves merely to survive. Jeanne was an avid learner; she acquired what we would call all the domestic arts from her mother and, despite the fact that her local parish was now suppressed and the church building set aside for secular uses, she obtained a deep and lasting knowledge of her faith almost clandestinely by listening to her elders and local members of a lay catechetical group known as the Third Order of Saint John Eudes which had been founded in the 17th century.

In her middle-teens Jeanne was placed as a kitchen maid to a local family, and through their goodness and her own generous instincts she began to exhibit an extraordinary love for the

poor and especially the homeless. Despite a proposal of marriage, she decided for religious reasons not to marry and to devote her life to God by caring for God's poor. Following this chosen vocation was not easy and did not come to maturity overnight. Her biographers describe various stages by which her prayer life and her life style changed as she became all-consumed by her passion to see Christ in the sick, the poor and the most abandoned of society. She gradually attracted others of similar dispositions and slowly a community took shape and a rule of life was established. Shelters for the poor, some of them would be considered primitive by today's standards, were established and to support these ever-expanding apostolates Jeanne became a beggar, going door to door and town to town, asking for left-over meals and used clothing. The initial revulsion engendered by the demeaning task was tempered by her devotion to and reliance on Saint Joseph and her overriding conviction that all she was doing was for God's neglected people.

As the new community began to grow, it adopted a specific ecclesiastical structure. Jeanne became Sister Mary of the Cross and in 1843 was reelected Superior of the group but a local priest, the Abbe La Palleur, took it upon himself to annul the election and to appoint his own choice, the young and inexperienced Marie Jamet, as the Superior. This obviously unjust action must have been a source of considerable inner conflict for Jeanne but her deep spirituality enabled her to rise above it and it did not hinder the growth of the community or the multiplication of its new foundations. The questionable motivations of the Abbe may have been an attempt to control the relatively new community but in the long run he did not succeed.

What was Jeanne like? I cannot improve on the description of a visiting Englishman who sought her advice before he established a hospital for the aged in his own country.

"Jeanne received us kindly," he wrote, "she was simply but cleanly dressed in a black dress and white cap and kerchief: this is the dress adopted by the community. She looks about fifty years old (actually 54 at the time), is of medium height with a sunburnt complexion, she looks worn out though her expression is serene and full of kindness; there is not the slightest trace of pretentiousness or conceit detectable in it."

To some extent aided by a number of positive articles in the French press about the growing community, new foundations were established in Tours, Paris, Nantes and Angers as the century reached its mid mark. Jeanne possessed what we might consider an almost irrational dependence on the providence of God and Saint Joseph was her secret weapon. An incident which took place in Angers illustrates this point. She noticed that the old people were eating dry bread. "But this is the land of butter," she exclaimed "why don't we ask Saint Joseph for some?" Surrounding their statue of the saint with a night-light and all the empty butter dishes, she propped up a sign: "Good Saint Joseph, send us butter for our old folk!" Amused visitors did not comprehend Jeanne's faith but a few days later an anonymous benefactor donated more than enough butter to fill all the dishes and then some.

By 1853 there were over 500 sisters, new statutes for the congregation had been approved and aided by no less a person than the famous novelist, Charles Dickens, the first house of the community outside France was established in London, England. But once again the inexplicable behavior of the Abbe Le Pailleur invaded the life of Jeanne Jugan and she was banished to an existence of virtual unanimity within the Congregation until her death twenty-seven years later. She accepted this rejection with great humility and, in many ways like her beloved patron, Saint Joseph; she too adopted in obedience a "hidden life" of self-effacement. There is

recorded just one spark of her personal judgment of what had happened to her. One day she smilingly told the scheming Abbe "You have stolen my work from me... but I willingly give it to you!" These words may have been light hearted in tone but they were uncannily prophetic: some years later as a result of growing complaints, the Holy See investigated the clergyman's behavior. He was removed from his position of influence, called to Rome and there died in seclusion. His hand-picked superior, the overly timid and docile Sister Marie Jamet was to rehabilitate the memory of Jeanne Jugan when, a few days before her death, she set the record straight in her declaration, "I am not the first Little Sister, nor the foundress of the work. Jeanne Jugan was the first one and the foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor."

When Pope Benedict XVI canonizes Jeanne Jugan in October I am sure he will speak of her extraordinary holiness, her unfathomable dependence on the providence of God, her prayerful acceptance of the harsh and unjust rejection which dominated her later years and he will praise the spiritual family which so lovingly continues her work of caring for the sick and the poor and the elderly. The whole world will know her better and, along with her ally, Saint Joseph, may she continue to guide all those who have generously followed in her footsteps and may she inspire many others to seek God by adopting the vocation which she followed so faithfully.

AMEN

