

Little Sisters of the Poor experience joy as they renew their vows

BY COLE DESANTIS

Rhode Island Catholic Correspondent

PAWTUCKET — It's just a little before noon on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The light of the sun passes through a series of stained-glass windows, only to be magnified by the bright white walls of the chapel. A group of a little more than a dozen religious sisters, dressed in black habits and gray veils, stand as they are approached by Bishop Richard G. Henning. Holding candles, a sign of the Divine Presence in their community, they watch as their mother superior, Mother Patricia Mary, L.S.P., receives a copy of a revised version of the Constitutions of their order. The sisters then recite a series of prayers in which they promise to live out their religious vows with a renewed sense of dedication and zeal.

Such was the scene during the vow renewal service at Jeanne Jugan Residence Home run by the Little Sisters of the Poor in Pawtucket, in which Bishop Henning celebrated Holy Mass for the community, with Father Stuart McPhail, O.P., and Father Robert Caul, two resident priests at the home, concelebrating.

It is a longstanding tradition among the Little Sisters of the Poor to hold their vow renewal ceremony specifically on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. This is a tradition that goes back to the time of its foundress, St. Jeanne Jugan. To deepen their commitment to their religious vows on the day in which most Catholics meditate upon the example of the Blessed Mother is a source of great happiness for the sisters.

"We truly experience a deep joy," said Mother Patricia Mary.

After Mass, she showed the bishop around the home as he met with the residents and offered them his blessing. Bishop Henning went on to join the members of the community for lunch.

"Some have already made their vows 40 or 50 years ago, but it's really exciting to come here and renew your vows, and be more closely united to God," said Sister Laurelliya Jesuthasan, L.S.P., a sister of the Little Sisters of the Poor community.

"It was beautiful, because it's a celebration of people who have given their lives to help the elderly," said Jean Lachance, a resident of



Photos: Cole DeSantis

DEEP COMMITMENT TO THEIR VOWS: Above, local members of the Little Sisters of the Poor renew their vows in the presence of Bishop Richard G. Henning on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. At right, Bishop Henning visits with residents on a tour of the Jeanne Jugan nursing facility in Pawtucket, where the Little Sisters serve the elderly poor.

the home. "Their impact is enormous on all of us who are elderly. They are good to us in every single way. They foresee all of our needs, and it's amazing to us how they can see that ahead of time. They are just wonderful, really wonderful."

The Little Sisters of the Poor originated in the 19th century in France. Their foundress, Saint Jeanne Jugan, was born in 1792, amidst the political and social chaos surrounding the French Revolution. In the late 1830's, St. Jeanne was moved to help a homeless elderly woman suffering from a series of debilitating physical ailments, including blindness and paralysis. St. Jeanne eventually made it her mission to help the poor and sick, particularly among the elderly, in her community, and by the early 1840's St. Jeanne had developed a small network of caregivers to assist her. Within a few years this group had developed into a religious order. As a religious sister, St. Jeanne took on the name Sister Marie of the Cross. Her order obtained official approval from local diocesan officials in 1852, and by

1854 had gained the approval of Pope Pius IX. Shortly after gaining Papal approval, the order began to spread internationally.

The earliest Little Sisters of the Poor home was established in Rhode Island in 1881. Originally stationed in Providence, they transferred to Pawtucket in 1883, where they were based in the Holy Trinity Home, which was donated to the Sisters by a group of local faithful. They remained at the Holy Trinity Home until 1979, when they transferred to the Jeanne Jugan Residence (also in Pawtucket), where the Little Sisters of the Poor currently live and work.

Much of the spirituality and practical philosophy of the Little Sisters of the Poor is rooted in the belief that authentically Christian love moves us towards giving of ourselves to our fellow man. This was something emphasized by Bishop Henning in his homily. While preaching to the sisters and the residents, Bishop Henning noted how one of the effects of sin is that it leads us to seek power for its own sake, with power or authority often being conceived in terms of something self-serving that entitles us



to do to others whatever we please. God's Plan of salvation gives expression to the Power of God, which is identified with His Love, thereby giving us an authentic understanding of what true power entails.

"The power of God is nothing more, nothing less than love, for God is love," Bishop Henning said. He went on to note that the association of true power with love is something that Christ exemplifies particularly in his Incarnation, as well as by the Blessed Virgin Mary in her loving submission to the Will of God. Through this expression of love, Jesus and Mary bring hope and joy to otherwise hopeless situations, which serves as a model for the faithful today, including those who serve the poor, sick and marginalized, who are called to be signs of hope for their fellow man.

This is something exemplified in the spiritual philosophy of the Little Sisters of the Poor.

"The charism of the Little Sisters of the Poor is unique, in the fact that all Little Sisters worldwide are dedicated to welcoming the elderly, making a home for them and caring for them," said Mother Patricia. It is this act of serving others and bringing hope to them that serves as the source of a sense of meaning and joy that was on clear display among members of their community.

"Like most Little Sisters of the Poor, I too was drawn by the joy of the sisters, their dedication, love and joy shared and given to the elderly residents for whom they cared," Mother Patricia said.