

CANONISATION OF BLESSED JEANNE JUGAN
FOUNDRESS OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE LITTLE SISTERS OF
THE POOR

ST PETER'S BASILICA, ROME

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

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INTRODUCTION:

It is not so very long since Blessed Jeanne Jugan was declared Blessed by the late Pope John Paul II. This event took place in St Peter's Square in Rome on 3rd October 1982. Now we are preparing to celebrate the canonisation of the Foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor - with the ceremony to be held in St Peter's Square in Rome on Sunday 11th October 2009 and the celebrations led by Pope Benedict XVI.

I am sure that all of us have had some contact with the Little Sisters of the Poor – in convents and homes near ourselves or through the outstanding reputation of the Little Sisters in their loving care for the sick and the elderly. I myself am privileged to have a convent and home of the Little Sisters at the heart of my own Archdiocese in Edinburgh; and just a few years ago I was invited by the Mother General, Mother Celine de la Visitation to visit La Tour Saint Joseph in France to receive the vows of four Little Sisters.

Much of the life and work of our new saint will be known to you – but I do not hesitate to repeat some of that fascinating history now.

HISTORY OF THE LITTLE SISTERS OF THE POOR:

Jeanne Jugan herself was born in Cancale in France on 25th October 1792 and was baptised on the same day during the upheaval of the French Revolution. Her father, a sailor like most men from that area, was away in Newfoundland for the fishing season – and only four years later he was lost at sea. It was left to her mother to raise her four children with Jeanne at the age of sixteen helping her family by working as a kitchen maid in a manor near Cancale. Jeanne stayed there until the age of 25 and then left home for Saint Servan where she worked as a nurse's aide at Le Rosais Hospital.

Jeanne desired only to serve God and the poor and was faithful to the spirituality of the time especially that of St John Eudes and an association which she had joined around the age of 25.

One winter's evening in 1839 she opened her door and her heart to a blind semi paralysed elderly woman who had found herself alone. Jeanne gave this lonely and poor old lady her own bed – but more and more elderly women followed until in 1843 they numbered some forty elderly people. Jeanne was chosen to be the Superior of the small association of women looking after the poor and the elderly with great assistance from the brothers of St John of God who were involved in a similar work. Jeanne herself was to spend some twelve years in this active work of establishing her little group of helpers from 1839 until 1852 in the same way as John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord. After that Blessed Jeanne Jugan found herself called to retirement and a hidden life spending

the remaining 27 years of her life virtually alone. She lived away from the public in the seclusion of the novitiate of the Congregation which she had founded – but she continued to be an outstanding inspiration to the young women considering their vocation. However the little congregation was approved by the Church authorities – and homes were soon opened in Scotland while Jeanne Jugan was still alive: In Glasgow in 1862, in Edinburgh in 1863, in Dundee in 1873, and then in Greenock in 1884 less than five years after the death of Jeanne.

The outstanding work of the Little Sisters has grown and flourished throughout the world so that today while there are 2,710 Little Sisters of the Poor their work continues on the five continents in 202 homes caring for over 1,300 residents.

APOSTOLATE OF JEANNE JUGAN:

I think every Little Sister would consider Jeanne Jugan's life in two stages: Her more active apostolate and her hidden life.

During her **active apostolate** Jeanne herself made the decision of opening her door to that blind semi-paralysed woman needing help in 1839. It was Jeanne who continued to gather in elderly women in need of care and worked with three young female companions in this apostolate. It was Jeanne Jugan who was chosen by them as the Superior of their small association which would gradually develop in to a true religious life.

The way in which the work of the association, later recognised as a congregation in the Church, grew and developed not only in France but eventually throughout the five continents of the world is an amazing one. Obviously help was given by others and in a special way by the brothers of St John of God. Jeanne herself was helped by Brother Claude – Marie Gandetoh who was serving in a convent at Dinan. It was Brother Claude Marie who while collecting for the brothers hospital knocked on Jeanne's door and explained to her the mission of begging for the poor. Because of this initial contact when the rule of the Little Sisters of the Poor was being drawn up **hospitality became a fourth vow** of the religious sisters just as it was for the religious brothers of St John of God.

With regard to the apostolate of Jeanne Jugan the second great lesson we learn is that of **silent secret prayer and love**. When Jeanne Jugan was withdrawn from her active responsibility and reduced to the simple activity of collecting and then even undertaking a more quiet and obscure life she simply saw all this as part of God's will for her. Her life became more and more shrouded in secrecy – initially four years with the community in Rennes and then for the last 23 years of her long life at La Tour Saint Joseph the Mother House of the congregation of the Little Sisters of the Poor since 1856.

During that long time and up to her death on 29th August 1879 when she was 86 very few Little Sisters knew that she was the Foundress of their congregation. However any sisters at that time, and those who knew of her reputation, were clear that her influence on the young postulants and novices whose life she shared during those long 27 years proved to be decisive. It was though the prayer and the example of the Mother Foundress that the initial charism of the congregation was passed on and the spirit of the basic beginnings of the congregation were transmitted.

At the beatification ceremony in 1982 Pope John Paul II spoke of how Jeanne Jugan had achieved sanctity. He stated that:

“Thanks to her daily exercises of piety – the long periods of silent prayer, participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice and reception of Holy Communion more frequently than was the custom at that time, thoughtful recitation of the Rosary, which she never stopped, and fervently kneeling as she made the Stations of the Cross – the soul of Jeanne Jugan was steeped in the mystery of Christ the

Redeemer, especially in his passion and his cross. Her name and religion, Sister Mary of the Cross, is a real and moving symbol of this”.

APPLICATION TO OUR LIVES:

In gathering here today we have not only gathered to think of the wonderful life and apostolate of Jeanne Jugan in founding the Little Sisters of the Poor; nor have we only gathered to thank our present Little Sisters for their wonderful apostolate in our midst.

Rather I think we really must endeavour in every possible way to apply something of the lesson of Jeanne Jugan’s life to **our own active apostolates**.

Of course, each and every one of us leads very active lives as Christians in the Church and in the world of today. More and more are exercising as lay women and lay men what the late Pope John Paul II very beautifully described as “exalted vocations”. Many people are involved in similar apostolates to that of Jeanne Jugan and her Little Sisters in being involved with the elderly, sick and needy peoples of their towns and cities. Many more are engaged in outreach to the poor and needy throughout the world. And all should defend the sanctity of life in old age, being aware that each life is important in the sight of Almighty God – with this being ever more important at this present time when so many attacks are being made upon life, not only at its beginnings, but as people near the natural end of their lives on earth.

However, the lesson of St Jeanne Jugan’s life is not only with regard to our active apostolate but rather with those 27 years of hidden apostolate in prayer and penance – as indeed we see so many parallels to the hidden life of Jesus Christ himself for those thirty years inspiring him in his three years of public ministry.

Everything that we do must be rooted in our lives of prayer and penance; our lives of action must be **rooted in our lives of spirituality**.

I remind you of the ways in which Pope John Paul II indicated that Jeanne Jugan grew closer and closer to the Lord – prayer, the Mass, frequent communion, the Rosary and Stations of the Cross.

No mention is made of any extraordinary penances; no detail is given of any prolonged periods of fasting or abstinence. Open to us are the same means of spirituality as were opened to Jeanne Jugan. Perhaps the only difference between Jeanne Jugan and our spirituality is the way in which Jeanne Jugan was ready to grasp any opportunity of growing closer to the Lord in her ways of prayer and penance.

CONCLUSION:

Sharing in the joy of this occasion may we too now try to renew our own lives following something of the example of St Jeanne Jugan. May we appreciate more and more that wonderful apostolate of the Little Sisters of the Poor in extending our own outreach to those in particular need – in our own families, in our parishes and in the world. And may our outreach be inspired in every possible way by our own lives of prayer and penance grasping the opportunities given us day by day to grow closer to the Lord in our prayer and in our penance.

As Jeanne Jugan was given that name in relation of St Mary of the Cross so may to that cross of Jesus inspire us – in reaching upwards to Almighty God our Father in Heaven while extending our arms in embrace to those who are most in need in our world.