

Good Shepherd Sunday: Taking on the smell of the sheep

BY SISTER CONSTANCE VEIT, LSP — among them to care for the sick and elderly

Each year the Church celebrates Good Shepherd Sunday on the fourth Sunday of Easter. Looking ahead to this year's observance, I began pondering a rather gritty expression used by Pope Francis in his speeches and writings.

Pastors and evangelizers, he says, must "take on the smell of the sheep." What does this mean? Reflecting on the example of our foundress, St. Jeanne Jugan, helped me to understand the significance of this expression in our vocation as Little Sisters of the Poor.

St. Jeanne grew up in Brittany, France, in the early 19th century. As a young girl, she worked as a shepherdess to help support her family — but I don't think this is what the pope means by taking on the smell of the sheep!

What he is saying is that those who hope to evangelize — to touch the hearts of others with the good news of Jesus Christ — must be willing to get involved in people's daily lives, to meet them where they are and to serve them with the humble attitude of Jesus — "to touch the suffering flesh of Christ in others" (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 24). Jeanne Jugan did precisely this in her mission of hospitality to the needy elderly of her time.

St. Jeanne established an international community of women religious who serve the elderly by offering them hospitality and caring for them as members of their own family. She didn't just sit at home and wait for the poor to come knocking at her door (although many did just this). As a laywoman, Jeanne first began serving the poor by going out among them to care for the sick and elderly wherever she found them in her local community. Then, on a cold winter night in 1839, she was inspired to open her home and her heart to a blind, infirm old woman who had no one to care for her.

As more needy elderly persons were welcomed into her home — first in a small apartment and then in the larger, but quite primitive accommodations she was able to obtain — Jeanne found herself faced with the predicament of how to provide for them. Humbling herself, she decided to go out begging for her old people, many of whom had been beggars themselves.

In this new mission, Jeanne was both warmly received and scoffed at; on one occasion she was slapped in the face by a potential donor. "That was for me," she responded, "Now give me something for my poor."

At first, Jeanne was welcomed at the local charity office and allowed to go to the head of the line to collect the provisions to which her elderly were entitled. But one day an annoyed official told her to get to the back of the line with the other poor people. Jeanne accepted her role to be one of the poor, rather than merely serving them, and so she took her place in line from that day forward, saying, "Call me now the humble servant of the poor."

In forming the young women who joined her, St. Jeanne was clear that they were to be one with the elderly, sharing life with them and serving them as their "little sisters."

The community was first called the Servants of the Poor, then Sisters of the Poor, and finally Little Sisters of the Poor, to reflect Jeanne's vision that the Sisters and their elderly residents would form a single family. There was no division between them, for Jeanne realized that to love the elderly it was not enough to provide for them — it was essential to be humble so as to be close to them.

"An evangelizing community is supportive," wrote Pope Francis, "standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be." For the Little Sisters of the Poor — both in Jeanne's time and our own — this means reaching out to the poorest, being involved in the daily lives of the needy elderly and accompanying them through the sometimes arduous journey of old age until they cross the threshold of eternal life.

As we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday, which is also observed as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, please join us in praying that young women who are willing to "take on the smell of the sheep" will embrace our mission of hospitality to the needy elderly as Little Sisters of the Poor.

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KERRI LENARTOWICK/CATHOLIC NEWS AGENCY

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LITTLE SISTERS OF THE POOR

Sister Laurencia and a resident admire the lilies in the garden at the Jeanne Jugan Residence in San Pedro. May 11 is the World Day of Prayer for Vocations.