

## Little Sisters of the Poor Focus on Care for Elderly

The 'begging order' of nuns relies largely on gifts to run a home in San Pedro for 100.

By TERESA WATANABE  
Times Staff Writer

Sister Mary Augustine decided she wanted to work with the elderly when she was 10 years old. She was in a butcher shop with her mom and saw a shabbily dressed older woman order a quarter-pound of bologna. Even at that early age, she says, it hit her hard: The poor woman seemed to have little to live on all week but bologna.

Nearly 50 years later, the nun has ensured that the older people she serves get far more than that.

As a Little Sister of the Poor, a Roman Catholic religious order dedicated to the elderly poor, Sister Mary Augustine has cooked them roast beef and steaks, chicken fricassee and hearty stews — and a favorite, hot dogs and beans — at group senior homes throughout the country.

She and the other nuns give the residents baths and medications, wash their clothes and clean their rooms. Calling themselves "a begging order," the sisters ask for money and products to help the seniors.

And, in what many nuns call their ministry's best moments, they usher the dying through their final moments on Earth, praying and singing to them to help ease their passage.

"Everyone likes to take care of kids, and the older people get forgotten sometimes," said the nun, a New Jersey native with a fast-talking, wisecracking mien. "But you can't dump old people. They are walking history books. They've made lots of contributions. All of a sudden they're not worth anything anymore?"

The worldwide order of 3,100 sisters in 32 countries was founded in France in 1839 and will celebrate its centennial anniversary in Southern California next year. This year, the order is commemorating its 25th year in San Pedro, where 10 sisters run a home for about 100 elderly residents.

Many marvel at the order's survival — their bookkeepers



**HAVEN:** Sister Sheila, left, a nun retired from the Sisters of St. Joseph, and Margaret Kramer, both residents, participate in midday Mass at the Little Sisters of the Poor facility in San Pedro. Nuns give residents baths and medications, wash their clothes and clean their rooms.

BOB CHAMBERLIN/Los Angeles Times

most of all.

The Little Sisters deliberately depend on what they call "divine providence." The order's founder, Jeanne Jugan, instructed the sisters not to build an endowment, in contrast with the strategy of many other nonprofit organizations. Instead, the sisters say, they live from day to day, putting full faith in St. Joseph, their patron saint, and their motto: "If God is with us, it will be accomplished."

At the San Pedro home, for instance, the nuns' superior, Mother Marguerite, was unruffled when she learned Tuesday that she had to meet a payroll of \$80,000 for the lay employees by Friday, even though she had only \$21,000 in the bank. "Wait until the mail comes in," she told the staff.

They did — and that afternoon they received a check for \$50,000 from the Burbank-based Fritz B. Burns Foundation and a note from another donor promising enough money to make the payroll.

That was only a minor miracle compared with the whopping \$12-million contract to build the order's San Francisco home that Mother Marguerite signed in 1979 — with no money in the bank. The contractor, she said, asked her where the sisters planned to get the money.

"From St. Joseph," she calmly replied.

"The color drained from his face," she recalled with a laugh. But they never missed a payment to him — or a payroll, she said. Most of the nuns carry tiny statues of St. Joseph in their

pockets, and they have buried them on the grounds of property they desire for new homes.

At the moment, they are praying for help to upgrade their medical suites at the San Pedro facility and build new residential space for themselves. Every year, the San Pedro sisters must raise \$2.5 million to meet their \$4-million budget; the rest is provided through their residents' Social Security and Medicare/Medi-Cal payments, among other sources.

The sisters, who still wear habits and take a vow of poverty, assign particular nuns to beg for their needs.

Most days, for instance, Sister Emma and a partner visit supermarkets, the wholesale market in Central Los Angeles and other vendors for food, paper goods, toiletries and other

items. The current supermarket strike disrupted their supplies initially, because some providers faced inventory shortages.

"It's hard, especially when you're told you're the third charity that has called," said Sister Emma, who recalled being inspired to join the order after seeing her grandfather live a lonely, impoverished life. "You have to take it away from yourself and think, 'This isn't for me; it's for God and the residents.'"

Since last fall, the nuns have been allowed to ask pastors for permission to make direct appeals at parishes in Los Angeles. Parish appeals provide much of the order's support in other cities but had been discontinued by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles some time ago.

Like most religious orders,

the Little Sisters have declined in numbers. The order fell from a peak of 5,000 members worldwide in the early 1960s to 3,100 today. Still, they are expanding their presence, with two new homes for the elderly scheduled to be opened in the Philippines and Africa.

Their spotless San Pedro home features a chapel, beauty salon, medical and dental suites, and activity rooms for sewing, ceramics and cooking. The Blue Dog Cafe offers coffee and breads in the mornings and ice cream in the afternoons. To keep the residents perky, the sisters keep several caged birds and two new poodles, Peanut and Shelley.

Earlier this week, some residents began their day with a game of ball toss. Others baked rosetta cakes and muffins. Residents, who are not required to be Catholic, are offered Mass twice a day and an afternoon prayer meeting.

One resident, Audette Newjahr, 77, said a religiously inspired sense of joy permeates the home, making her experience there markedly different from that at her previous facility. The Little Sisters, she said, put a loving touch on everything they do, whether giving her a surprise birthday party last month or greeting her arrival with a special card of welcome.

"They look at you and make you feel they really care, that you're part of God's creation," Newjahr said, adding that her other facility had made her feel merely like "a dollar bill."

Jeanette Urbin, an eight-year resident, regards the San Pedro home as her last stop before heaven. "If heaven isn't like this," she said, "then I'm not going."

She has been especially impressed with the way the Little Sisters help residents through their final moments of life with songs, recitation of the rosary and Bible verses.

Never ones to waste a begging opportunity, sometimes the sisters whisper a wish into the dying resident's ear: Please ask God for more nuns when you get to heaven.

"To be with the dying is a special privilege of our vocation," Sister Paul said. "These people have one foot in heaven; it's almost like being halfway there yourself."