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by Julia Murphy
photos by John Mattera

There is an active field of energy between the Little Sisters of the Poor (LSP) and the community. Pounding the pavement, two designated Little Sisters request all types of donations as they traverse the city in “the Begging Van.” “The Little Sisters of the Poor trust completely in God’s Providence and beg daily in the markets and places of business,” says Rita Swartz, LSP’s Development Director. “Each year they must raise about sixty percent of their operating costs from gifts, bequests and donated commodities.”

LSP’s mission of begging is prospered by a powerful channel of prayer that is vibrant, ongoing and earnest. With their dedication to God, to the Blessed Jeanne Jugan, and to St. Joseph, their Protector, the Little Sisters of the Poor have summoned great results in their continued efforts to serve the elderly poor.

Jeanne Jugan, fisherman’s daughter and the French founder of the order, devoted her life completely to the dignity and respect of the aged in 1839 when she gave up her own bed to a homeless blind woman and then took in another frail stranger, and then another. The future St. Jeanne Jugan embraced the humility of begging in order to help others. “Be little,” she would tell her novices. “Make yourselves little.” From its nineteenth

century beginnings, this Catholic order of nuns grew because of their prayerful diligence, active begging, and the resulting immense generosity from the humblest of gifts to the wealthiest of benefactors. The order today has 2,700 Little Sisters worldwide in 202 homes in 32 countries.

Little Sisters of the Poor arrived in Los Angeles in 1905 and took residence in the newly built St. Ann’s in Boyle Heights. St. Ann’s, as well as St. Anne’s in San Francisco, was underwritten by a devoted benefactor, Edward Joseph Le Breton, a prominent banker from San Francisco. The Boyle Heights home operated for 72 years until it had to be closed in 1971. Coincidentally, in San Pedro, the Catholic boys’ Fermin Lasuen High School had also closed the same year. The Archdiocese and Cardinal Timothy Manning knew the Little Sisters needed a new home and decided to donate the Fermin Lasuen property to LSP. After several years of fundraising and construction, resident housing was completed in 1979 with the transplants from St. Ann’s the first occupants.

The Jeanne Jugan Residence (JJR) has continued to expand and renovate since then. The Fritz B. Burns Medical Wing, for example, was dedicated in 2006. The Medical Wing and Cha-

pel are on the second floor as is the Skilled Nursing Unit. There is 24-hour nursing care for these residents. There are rooms for exams, physical therapy, dental and vision care. Physicians, dentists, dermatologists (Dr. Carmen Capodanno attended Fermin Lasuen High School) and other medical professionals donate their time. (The Jeanne Jugan Residence also follows federal and state guidelines in its operation and meets the California Labor Relations Board guidelines.) The third floor comprises Residential Living and the most independent residents live in apartments on the north end of the property. In order to qualify as potential residents, men and women need to have assets limited to \$20,000. They also need to be healthy and ambulatory. “As their frailties progress,” says Swartz, “they’ll then be comfortable with their surroundings.”

There are seven Sisters and Mother Paul, the Mother Superior. Each plays a major role in the operation of the facility whether it’s to collect food and other items to offset operating expenses, oversee the chapel or run the skilled nursing unit. Retired Monsignor Timothy O’Connell serves as chaplain and performs sacraments such as daily Mass, Confession and the Anointing of the Sick. The Sisters are supported by a staff of



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Sr. Caroline is always ready with a smile and a joke, bringing levity and humor to the residents.

approximately 60, many of whom have worked with them for more than 20 years. The nuns, staff, volunteers and residents comprise a warm, supportive network. “Little Sisters of the Poor is a little bit of heaven on earth,” says Kathy Gordon, one of the founding Auxiliary board members, who also handles LSP publicity in conjunction with Rita Swartz.

“There’s such a happiness, peace and a Godliness,” says Peggy Di Leva, president of the Little Sisters of the Poor Auxiliary. “It always radiates out of this place. It doesn’t matter who it is, nursing staff, nuns, cleaning staff... I certainly saw the Godliness present in the Sisters,” continues Di Leva. “I saw the care my mother [Alice Dooley] received and it was never anything less than perfect.”

“Giving happiness to the elderly remains of utmost importance to the Little Sisters today” says LSP’s centennial publication *Caring for Christ in the Person of the Elderly Poor*. LSP is hardly a depressing way station. Day-to-day activities at JJR may include visits to the first floor hair salon where a certified beautician and barber donate their time. The room sports a row of turquoise-colored hair dryers and matching furniture that would make any collector of vintage 1960s furniture break

into a cold sweat. The gift shop offers greeting cards and items knitted by residents and volunteers. There’s also a craft room (with a kiln left over from Fermin Lasuen High School days) and a computer room (The Blue Dog Café) where a volunteer leads residents down the cyber rabbit hole. The surrounding grounds include a beautiful garden behind the home with a pathway framed by an arched trellis of wisteria. There’s a stone grotto with a statue of the Blessed Mother which oversees the gardens. Western Avenue is only yards away but you barely register the noise.

“We’re grateful to our friends and benefactors for helping us in this suffering economy,” says Mother Paul. LSP’s website (www.lspsoal.org) expands on this. “We believe that through their selfless charity, a channel of grace is opened in the souls of our benefactors.”

“There have been times when donations have come in at the last minute when we needed to make payroll,” says Schwartz. “It really makes you a believer when you witness it over and over again. God really wants their work to continue in San Pedro.”

When a resident’s health is in its final stages, Little Sisters maintain a 24-hour vigil and invite staff and volunteers to visit.

“Being present and praying with the residents when they die is a major aspect of our charism,” says Mother Paul “and one which is very dear to our hearts.” No one dies alone. It’s a sad but peaceful time due to the blanket of love and devotion surrounding the feeble. “The ultimate of our postulate is to prepare them for heaven,” says one Little Sister. “It’s very exciting that we get to see them just before they see Almighty God!”

And so, their final hours are viewed as the beginning to a new life. Former resident Alice Dooley struggled in her last few years at Jeanne Jugan Residence. Her daughter, Peggy Di Leva, visited her every day. One morning while at home, Peggy received a call from the LSP. “My mom...?” she asked. “Oh, yes, your mother’s just fine,” a cheerful voice answered. “She went home to Heaven today!” For Alice Dooley, the work of the Little Sisters was complete. Her final years had culminated in a day of peace. Alice had been lovingly guided to Heaven on the strength of prayers and service. **spt**

Little Sisters of the Poor is located at 2100 S. Western Ave. For more info, call (310) 548-0625 or visit www.lspsoal.org.