

## **Mass for St Jeanne Jugan**

**31<sup>st</sup> October 2009**

### **Westminster Cathedral**

#### **Homily of Archbishop Vincent Nichols**

Earlier this week, CARITAS Social Action issued a Report which presented the Mapping of Care given by Catholic Community to the Elderly. The research was carried out by Middlesex University.

It was timely for it provided empirical data for public debate about the endings of life.

Indeed, the Report was welcome also because it highlighted the witness in deeds offered today by the Catholic Community. This is something of which we can be proud. It is the evidence of Church making a positive and crucial contribution to the good of society.

The Report also highlighted the challenge to be faced by us all.

The numbers of elderly will increase by 25% in 10 years. There will be a doubling in dementia in 10 years. The need for care homes will increase by 150%.

Yet, we also learn, that most elderly people stay at home and want to do so. So a real flexibility of care is required, with more innovative patterns combining support at home, semi-independent living, retirement villages and other forms.

Today we rejoice in the witness in action is offered in the report, which highlights the fact that so much is to be found in the routines of parish life and in the kindness and neighbourliness of communities, still widespread in so much of this country.

And a powerful witness is also given in the well organised care homes and hospices run by Catholic institutions.

Among them are, of course, homes run by the Little Sisters of the Poor. We all know that they are outstanding for their kindness, well run manner and for the spiritual sensitivity, awareness and care which is at the heart, just as the chapel is at the heart of their buildings.

We thank God today for the work of the Little Sisters of the Poor.

Earlier this month, on 11<sup>th</sup> October, a great ceremony of Canonisation took place with Benedict XVI in Rome. Among the five new saints was Sister Mary of the Cross – Jeanne Jugan. And among the vast congregation on that day were many happy Sisters of hers and friends. Today we echo that moment, that joy, that thanksgiving.

We cannot understand the work of the Little Sisters without a real appreciation of Jeanne Jugan. We cannot understand the true care of the elderly which she inspires without a deeper insight into her core experiences: experiences of poverty and hard work in her childhood; of the link between catechesis and

charity formed in the years of service with her elderly employer during which teaching catechism to youngsters and the works of charity went hand in hand.

Only in a growing knowledge of the Lord does the true motive for the works of charity become clear. In her own words:

‘Look upon the poor with compassion and Jesus will look kindly upon you on your last day.’

We also need to understand the courage and companionship she fashioned and experiences in her life. We recall how she found strength and inspiration with two other women as she set out on the road of caring for the elderly. They were a remarkable trio: Francoise Aubert, aged 72; Jeanne Jugan aged 45; Virgine Tredaniel aged 17. What a sight they must have been as they walked each Sunday on the beach, talking animatedly about their experience of prayer, about their love of the Lord and of their desire to serve Him.

First they were a community of prayer; then a community of caring for the poor. And this is still the pattern of daily life for the Little Sisters of the Poor.

They were joined by a priest Fr Le Pailleur who pushed things along but later gave so much grief.

All of this formed Sister Mary of the Cross for deeper challenges.

As we know, her desire to serve found a strong echo in the hearts of young women. Five years after the start she drew up the first rule of life and the first vows of obedience. Her movement was growing rapidly.

By the time Jeanne Jugan died, 50 years later, there were 2400 Sisters in Europe and in North America and shortly afterwards, in South America too.

That same instinct for generosity exists today in many young women. Let us hope and pray that this instinct develops and flourishes into vocations to care for elderly in religious life.

But the core challenge, the one which is so difficult today, is not so much the vocation to generosity as the call to self-forgetfulness – the ability genuinely and thoroughly to put others first and to rely on Christ.

This is the true core of the holiness of Jeanne Jugan and, I believe, reason for fruitfulness of her vocation and of her Congregation.

In her life she not only experienced material poverty but, more importantly, she explored personal, spiritual poverty too. And she did so out of love, love for her poor elderly, and love for Jesus, her Lord

It is on this road that her greatness lies.

It is expressed, for example, in the place she gave to begging, that deliberate, making clear, what poverty really is: an utter dependence on others and the humility which goes with that dependence.

Indeed, such dependence is so rejected by some today that they would rather kill themselves than live in dependence on others.

Her insistence on the importance of begging was also motivated by the desire to give others a chance to contribute while always keeping focus on Christ Jesus in whose name this is done.

I love the story of her receiving a large gold medal, from the local Masonic Lodge, as public recognition of her work and her promptly melting it down so that it could be made into a golden chalice! I cherish her advice for us in our weakness:

‘When your patience and your strength run out and you feel alone, go and find him. Jesus is waiting for you in the Chapel. Say to him, “Jesus, you know exactly what is going on. You are all I have and you know all things. Come to my help.” And then go, and don’t worry about how you are to manage. That you have told God is enough. He has a good memory!’

But, as you know, this prayer and the faith it expresses, were severely tested.

Betrayed by the priest she trusted, who used his position to gain control of this emerging Congregation, this active, outgoing woman was forced to spend the last 27 years of her life confined to the Mother House, cut off from her work.

She never complained or fought the injustice of her situation. She entered into this experience of deprivation and poverty as – I imagine – a deep identification with the poverty and deprivation which comes with old age, the experience of her beloved elderly, and with a deep identification with the sufferings of Christ. She was, after all, Sister Mary of the Cross.

Perhaps it was this intense experience of self-giving, of obedience, on her part and all these years of prayer, that gave rise to the extraordinary growth of the Little Sisters of the Poor.

The work she did and her working spirit and example are undoubtedly an inspiration.

Yet it may well be that her enforced dependence on the Lord, helplessness before the Lord, was the true source of her greatness and her fruitfulness.

And this, surely, reminds us again of the richness of old age, not the richness of activity, business and success but the richness that comes in quite an opposite manner: in the experience of love in utter dependence; in the experience of prayer and presence with the Lord; in the task of bringing to the surface the true spiritual nature of our restlessness and learning, slowly, how to rest in the Lord.

In these ways St Jeanne Jugan teaches us to treasure our elderly, and to support and serve them with love.

We thank God today for the Little Sisters of the Poor, for their work, for their obedience, for their prayer and with confidence we say,

Saint Jeanne Jugan, Pray for us. Amen.