

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
HOMILY FOR THURSDAY OF THE 29TH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LITTLE SISTERS OF THE POOR IN THE USA
QUEEN OF PEACE RESIDENCE, QUEENS, NEW YORK

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to the United States, I am delighted to be with you today to celebrate this special anniversary. I want to express you to the Holy Father's spiritual closeness, paternal affection and heartfelt congratulations, to which I add my own. I salute Bishop Massa, Mother Celine, and all the Sisters, grateful for your service to the elderly poor and to the Gospel of Life. As a priest of the Archdiocese of Rennes and growing up in San Malo, hailing from that place where Saint Jeanne Jugan began her marvelous work, I have a particular fondness for the Sisters who faithfully cared for my own mother. How happy I am that the good work that Saint Jeanne Jugan spread to the United States one hundred fifty years ago!

Jesus Himself said to His disciples: *I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!* These sentiments would be echoed in the words of Ignatius of Loyola who sent Francis Xavier off to the missions with the command: "Go. Set the world on fire!" Our Holy Father never ceases to call the Church to be a missionary Church, one which goes forth to the spiritual and existential peripheries, to bring the Good News of salvation to the poor. In the Little Sisters of the Poor, we see the example of consecrated women, embracing the life of the evangelical counsels, setting aside all things to care for the elderly poor – a growing segment of the population in this country.

The British author Charles Dickens met Saint Jeanne Jugan once, and afterward he wrote: "There is in this woman something so calm, and so holy, that in seeing her I know myself to be in the presence of a superior being. Her words went straight to my heart, so that my eyes, I know not how, filled with tears."

What was that something that she had that touched his soul? It is that same something that the Little Sisters of the Poor possess to this day, which allows every elderly man or woman to enter a house such as this and to know that God cares for them and loves them. For here in this house and in the houses of the Little Sisters of the Poor, there is a great resistance to the throwaway culture that plagues this land and that threatens human dignity. Here we find that everyone is someone important – someone for whom the Son of Man, Jesus, entered the world to set it ablaze with divine love; someone for whom the Son of Man was willing to suffer and die – regardless of age, wealth or ability.

What was it that St. Jeanne Jugan had that brought Charles Dickens to tears? It was Christ and His Holy Spirit! Christ came to set the world on fire. He speaks of baptism and fire in connection with one another. John the Baptist had spoken of the one who was coming to "baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire". (Luke 3:16), and Jesus' speaking of the Spirit and fire looks forward to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, which is the true fire of divine charity which spreads throughout the world.

John the Baptist had also warned of judgment and punishment by fire, which points to the second coming of the Son of Man. At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, Simeon had said that Jesus

would be a “sign of contradiction.” Jesus offers peace to those who accept it, but He brings division inasmuch as some refuse to accept Him. In so-called “developed” nations, which were once Christian, the Presence of Christ and His Gospel are a source of division which ought to be relegated to the dust bin of history or at best, one’s private life. In Matthew’s Gospel, at the Last Judgment, the sheep and the goats will be separated based on what they did to the least of their brothers and sisters. These least include the elderly poor; how we treat them will be the “great criterion”, according to our Holy Father, for our own eternal destiny.

The Little Sisters of the Poor, having received a great outpouring of the Spirit, and seeing Christ, our Brother, in the elderly poor, continue to witness to Christ in the defense of religious liberty and human dignity. They bring division inasmuch as they are willing to fight for the unity of the human family, refusing to exclude the elderly or to consign them to the status of being a burden. For this, our society and this country owe them a debt of gratitude.

On this occasion then, I join myself with St. Paul in his prayer from the Letter to the Ephesians: *I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.*

Sisters, may the Holy Spirit continue to strengthen the works of your apostolate that you may share with one another and with the residents here *the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.* To paraphrase your foundress: “God will help you; the work is His.”