

Little Sisters of the Poor celebrate 150 years in U.S.

The Little Sisters of the Poor, a community of women dedicated to serving the elderly poor, is celebrating the 150th anniversary of its arrival in the United States. In 1868, a group of sisters left their motherhouse in Brittany, France, and opened a Home for the Aged Poor on DeKalb Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. Today the community has 2,400 Little Sisters who work in 31 countries worldwide; in the United States, 300 sisters serve in 27 homes in 19 states.

“The elderly population is growing, and the work we’re doing is needed more now than ever,” said Sister Constance Veit, an occupational therapist and community communications director who joined the community in 1985. “We’d love to have more vocations so that we could open more homes.”

‘Because we are Catholic’

The sisters refer to their sites as “homes for the elderly,” which meet the needs of the aging poor throughout the continuum of care. Their facilities include low-income housing for those still able to do much of their own self-care, to assisted living for residents unable to care for themselves at all.

Residents may have compelling circumstances (such as no family available to help care for them) and come to the home of their own free will. The residents often receive government retirement assistance, but such funding covers little more than half of the cost of providing care. The sisters must make up the difference by soliciting donations and through a variety of fundraisers.

“We Little Sisters of the Poor would like to humbly thank so

many wonderful people who have helped us over the years, making the expansion and continuation of our mission in America possible," Sister Constance said. "Without the support of so many we would not be here today."

Sister Constance stressed that residents are welcomed to the home regardless of their religion or race. While this may be a commonplace perspective today, she noted, it was not always the case. While the majority of residents in the United States are Catholic, that is not the case in the sisters' homes in northern Africa or India.

"We practice universal charity. As we like to say, 'We care for people because we are Catholic, not because they are,'" Sister Constance said.

Saintly origins

The community traces its roots to St. Jeanne Jugan (1792-1879), who was canonized by Pope Benedict in 2009. Jeanne was born in France in the turbulent, anti-Catholic period of the French Revolution.

Jeanne founded the Little Sisters in 1839 after she encountered Anne Chauvin, an elderly woman who was blind, paralyzed and had no one to care for her. Jeanne took care of Anne, letting her sleep in her own bed. The community since has been dedicated to aiding the elderly poor – offering them, as the community's website says, "a home where they will be welcomed as Christ, cared for as family and accompanied with dignity until God calls them to himself."

Other women joined Jeanne in her work, and by 1849 they were known as the Little Sisters of the Poor. They established a motherhouse and novitiate in 1852. In 1879, just months before Jeanne's death, Pope Leo XIII approved the community's constitution.

After arriving in Brooklyn in 1868, the sisters sent a report

to the motherhouse in France. They indicated that they had been well received, explaining, "The public appear delighted to see that we are willing to work for the poor; that we ask no endowment; that we desire to trust in providence and in the generosity of the public."

Religious family

As religious, the sisters take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. They also take a fourth vow of hospitality, which, according to their website, "brings our religious consecration into the concrete realities of everyday life. It gives a spiritual value to the many activities of our day, and enables us to communicate God's compassion and merciful love to the elderly."

They wear a black religious habit with gray veil, although in the warmer months they opt to wear a white habit. Their daily prayer life includes Mass with those they serve, Liturgy of the Hours, adoration, the Rosary and *lectio divina*. They also have regular confession. To aid in the spirit of contemplation, meals typically are taken in silence.

The sisters share the same home as the residents and strive to create a warm environment in which each resident is cared for and loved. Ellen Scott, a six-year Washington, D.C., home resident, noted: "We are family. I've never needed anything that the sisters didn't provide."

She said it was a blessing to live with the sisters, and said: "I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. I hope to spend the rest of my life here."

Carl Bergquist, a 12-year resident in Washington, D.C., likes the many activities he has available to him. "I'm busy all the time. I love playing bingo twice a week, and they take us on outings in a van," he said. "Last Christmas, they took us out to see the lights. They also take us to restaurants."

Bergquist likes leading the singing at daily Mass, having his own room and having doctors come to see him, rather than having to drive to an office. "The sisters are so good to us," he said.

Love till death

Daisy Alzate is a director of nursing, a lay staff member employed by the sisters. She has worked for the Little Sisters for nine years. "The sisters are kind to the residents, visitors and staff," Alzate said. "They are dedicated and compassionate to those in their care and advocate for their needs."

Alzate said she is most impressed with the sisters' devotion to the care for the dying. When residents are in their final hours, the sisters maintain a 24-hour vigil at their bedside, praying for them "and making sure that no one dies alone. I've never seen it anywhere else; it is really in their heart and part of their vocation."

Sister Constance added: "It's part of our tradition to accompany the elderly to the point of death. We've been blessed to see moments of conversion and reconciliation between family members. Also, when the elderly see other residents leave for heaven before them, they become more accustomed to death and more comfortable with it when their time comes."

The Little Sisters also are dedicated to the Church's teaching regarding the sanctity of human life. They were recently successful, for example, in being exempted from a mandate from the Obama administration requiring them to provide contraceptive and abortion-causing drugs as part of their health coverage for employees. They also are outspoken opponents of assisted suicide, Sister Constance said. "Every human life is sacred and inviolable, at every stage, regardless of disability or perceived usefulness."

Jim Graves writes from California.