

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD
CELEBRATION OF THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE LITTLE SISTERS OF THE POOR IN AMERICA
SATURDAY, JUNE 1, 2019
JEANNE JUGAN RESIDENCE, WASHINGTON, DC

My Dear Friends in Christ,

I am very happy to be with you to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Little Sisters of the Poor in America. I thank your Superior, Sister Mary Michael, and Sr. Joseph, for their kind invitation and for their help in preparing for this liturgy. I have traveled all over the United States to be with the Little Sisters of the Poor and their residents; they have a special place in my heart. 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 fondness for the Little Sisters who faithfully cared for my own mother.

What does one wear to celebration like this? For a nuncio or a priest, the answer is easy. Even for the sisters, they have their habits. But this question of what to wear for a special occasion is very important these days. Throughout the country, children are making their First Holy Communion. Little girls wear white dresses and boys wear ties and sometimes jackets for First Communion. Teenagers ask the question as they dress for prom. Graduates don special robes. With the wedding season fast-approaching, brides and grooms, maids of honor and groomsmen adorn themselves. The newly baptized are clothed in white. Newly ordained priests too will wear the chasuble, the sign of the gentle yoke of Christ!

What are you wearing? The Gospel mentions being "*clothed with power from on High,*" and the first reading mentions the *two men dressed in white garments* who say that "*Jesus has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.*"

As his disciples looked on, Jesus was lifted up into heaven and a cloud took him from their sight. Jesus has been "lifted up". In the Old Testament "to lift up" referred to royal enthronement. Christ's Ascension means the enthronement of the Crucified and Risen Son of Man, the manifestation of God's kingship over the world. Jesus, who humbled Himself in the Mystery of the Incarnation, and, as St. John Chrysostom says, took off the robes of glory, now is robed in Majesty – in glory from on High for His fidelity to His Father.

Jesus was "taken up." Where? The Ascension represents not so much a journey, but rather an action of God's power. The Father brings Jesus into the space of Divine Intimacy. The presence of the cloud that "took him out of their sight" connects the Ascension with the history of God's relationship with Israel.

God was always close to His People - from the cloud of Sinai and above the tent of the Covenant in the desert, to the luminous cloud on the mountain of the Transfiguration. To present the Lord wrapped in a cloud, as St. Luke does in Acts, recalls the same mystery expressed in the symbolism of the phrase, "seated at the right hand of God." As Christ ascends into heaven, He takes His humanity with Him. Humanity enters into intimacy with God in a new way; man now finds room in God forever.

Jesus ascended to heaven. We too want to go to heaven. Many of the residents in this home want nothing more than to go to heaven. However, heaven does not indicate a place above the stars but

something bolder: it indicates Christ Himself, the Divine Person who welcomes humanity fully and forever, the One in whom God and man are inseparably united forever.

To be in God, this is Heaven. We draw close to heaven to the extent that we draw close to Jesus and enter into communion with him. The Ascension invites us to draw close to Him invisibly present in our lives. The disciples returned to Jerusalem with joy. In the end, the Ascension was not really a separation, the Lord's permanent absence. On the contrary, they were certain that the Risen One was alive and that in him the gates of eternal life had been opened to humanity forever.

The Ascension did not imply Jesus' absence from the world but began the new form of his presence through His sharing in the God's royal power. His Presence remains in His Church – in her Sacraments, Sacred Ministers, in the hearts of believers. Jesus also promised His disciples that they would be *clothed with power from on high* – a clear reference to the Holy Spirit – *the Promise of the Father* - who gives us courage to carry out our mission.

One hundred fifty years ago, filled with the Holy Spirit, some brave Little Sisters of the Poor embarked on their mission in the United States. They had a mission to find the hungry, sick, naked, and elderly poor and to clothe them in dignity. Saint Jeanne Jugan and the Little Sisters of the Poor glorify God in their littleness, in their poverty, and in their care for the poor. In a world that tends to value people based on efficiency and productivity, there is a great danger – a risk to the life and dignity of the human person, especially of the elderly poor, who maybe are not as productive or efficient as they once were. We see it even in the recent case of the young, Frenchman Vincent Lambert.

It is at times like these that we must ask the Lord to be close to us and to send us once more the Holy Spirit to enkindle in us the fire of Divine Love, so that we may have the courage to witness to the gift of human life and defend the dignity of others, clothing them, above all, in unconditional love.

Jesus has ascended to the Father, but the mission of making God's love known remains for his disciples. We are his disciples. The disciples were told that they would be witnesses. The Apostles and many of the martyrs of the Church were witnesses to these things – His Death, Resurrection, and Ascension. They dipped their robes in the blood of the Lamb and so were clothed in the glory and entered heaven – communion with God. Saint Jeanne Jugan, though not a martyr, witnessed to the power of God's love among the elderly poor, clothing them in dignity and herself in holiness. What are you wearing?