

## **A heart for those who suffer**

*By Sister Constance Carolyn Veit, lsp*



Each February, the Church celebrates two events of special significance to Little Sisters of the Poor. On February 2, the Church celebrates the World Day of Consecrated Life, a day important to all men and women religious. On February 11, the World Day of the Sick is observed. Each of these special days offers an opportunity for us to affirm our vocation as consecrated women devoted to the Church's mission of compassion through the ministry of healthcare.

Preparing for these special days led me to recall my experience in Lourdes many years ago. At the time I was a newly professed Little Sister of the Poor assigned to one of our homes in Paris and was asked to accompany a group of our elderly Residents on a two-week trip to the Pyrenees, which would include several excursions to the famous Marian shrine in Lourdes.

When we first arrived at Our Lady's shrine I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of people participating in the outdoor ceremonies. The cacophony of languages being spoken simultaneously and the chaos of hundreds of people milling about, many being pushed in wheelchairs or stretchers and more than a few aggressively vying for the best spot in the procession, was disconcerting. But once I got used to the crowd, I witnessed something quite beautiful – and something I have never forgotten.

Whether it was at the culmination of the candlelight procession on the esplanade in front of the rosary basilica or in the hushed shadows of the grotto of the apparitions, I saw suffering humanity seeking consolation and refuge in the arms of Our Lady, and, through her, in the heart of the Church. It was a profoundly moving sight, but that was not all. As a woman religious in the midst of this great sea of humanity, I was approached over and over by people asking questions or simply confiding their problems to me and asking me to pray for them. I realized that as a consecrated person, it didn't matter where I was from or what language I spoke – to these people I represented the Church, and as such, the love and mercy of God.

In Lourdes I realized that just as Our Lady smiles down on those who kneel before her at the grotto, and just as the great rosary basilica seems to embrace the crowds gathered in her shadow, so as consecrated women devoted to the elderly we Little Sisters of the Poor have been commissioned by Christ and his Church to be the face and hands of Divine compassion in a broken world. Christ is counting on us to make our hearts a refuge for suffering humanity.

In his 1995 work *Vita Consecrata*, Blessed John Paul II wrote that consecrated life is a life of self-giving love, of practical and generous service to the poorest and the neediest. "The Church looks with admiration and gratitude upon the many consecrated persons who, by caring for the sick and the suffering, contribute in a significant way to her mission," he wrote. John Paul II

encouraged us to follow in the footsteps of the Divine Samaritan and to devote ourselves to the sick “with profound understanding and compassion.”

As we celebrate the World Day of Consecrated Life and the World Day of the Sick, please join us in praying for an increase of vocations to a life of self-giving love, and for authentic compassion for the suffering who seek comfort in the loving arms of Christ and his Church.

*Sister Constance Carolyn Veit is director of communications for the Little Sisters of the Poor in the United States. She can be reached at [communications@littlesistersofthepoor.org](mailto:communications@littlesistersofthepoor.org).*

**Photo caption:** At Jeanne Jugan Residence, Bronx, NY, Father Robert Dunn administers the sacrament of the anointing of the sick to Rev. Robert Savage, S.D.B. during a Lourdes celebration for the home’s Residents. Assisting are Sister Leema Rose and seminarian Sean Suckiel.