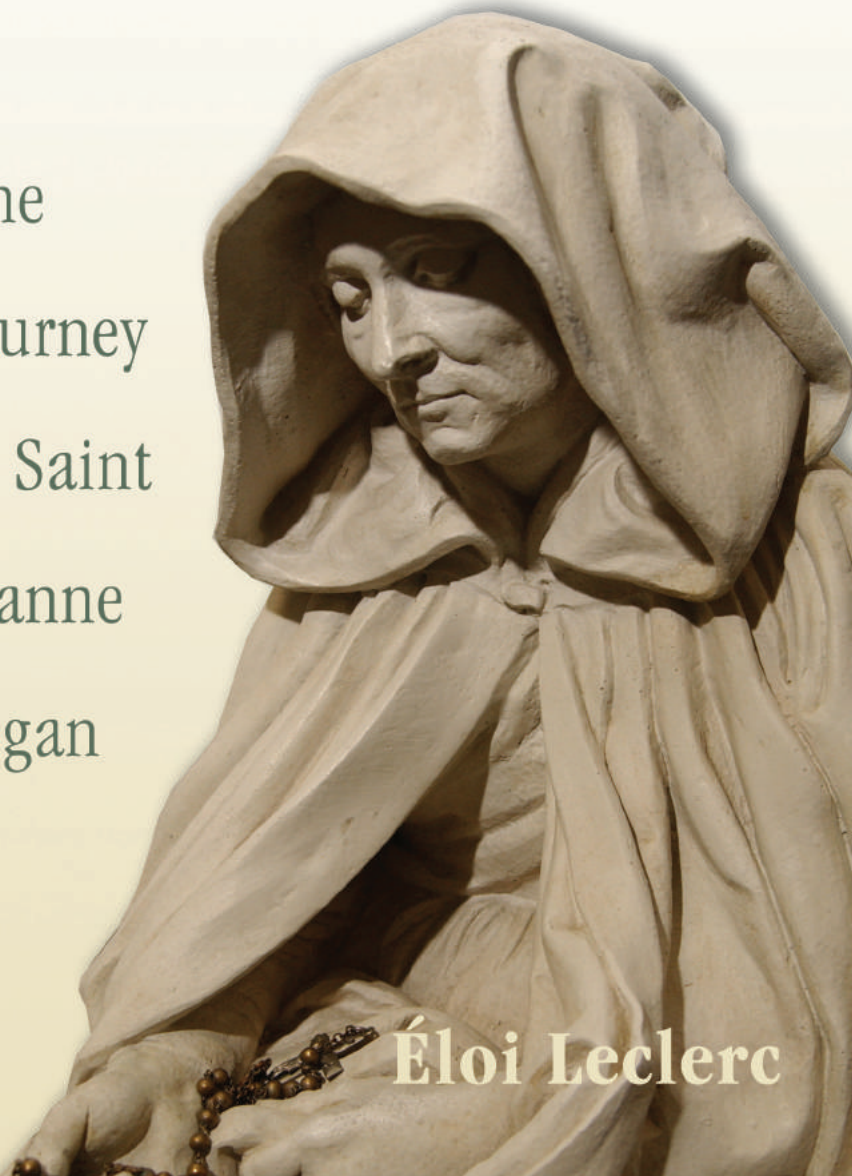


SONG *of* SILENCE

The
Journey
of Saint
Jeanne
Jugan



Éloi Leclerc

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Translated from the French
by Claire Trocmé


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*Who is that coming up from the wilderness,
leaning upon her beloved?*

(SONG OF SOLOMON 8:5)



Who is this that looks forth like the dawn?

(SONG OF SOLOMON 6:10)

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Foreword

DURING THE MORE THAN 150 years since the founding of the Little Sisters of the Poor, Saint Jeanne Jugan's commitment to service has been maintained with the same care and devotion that she showed in welcoming the poor elderly of Saint-Servan to her simple abode. The Little Sisters excel in continuing the ministry established by their foundress and upholding the original charism.

The contemporary world needs the example of Saint Jeanne Jugan. We need to be awakened from our obsession with material success, social achievement, and the seemingly endless accumulation of things. We need to provide the time and space in our lives that will allow us to recognize the presence of Jesus in our brothers and sisters, especially the poor, the frail, and those who have no one to care for them.

At the time Saint Jeanne and her emerging community were caring for senior citizens, it would not have been imagined that we would see so many people living into



their eighties, nineties, and even the beginning of their second century. Advances in medical care and better standards of living allow us to live well beyond the life expectancy of previous generations. On the whole we live much longer, but we do not always live better or have the care and companionship we need. Jesus' public ministry was often directed to renewing people and restoring them to their place in the community; helping them to find meaning in their lives. Saint Jeanne Jugan and the Sisters who carry on her work follow Jesus' example as they renew and restore the forgotten elderly, those who find themselves alone and without basic needs. They are light in the darkness for women and men who are burdened by the demands of the senior years; they help our elderly brothers and sisters to find meaning and fulfillment each day.

Through this important chronicle of Saint Jeanne's life, with particular focus on her unquestioning trust in the will of God, Éloi Leclerc has provided us a window into Saint Jeanne's soul. As Pope John Paul II noted at Saint Jeanne's beatification, "she depended completely on Divine Providence, which she saw operative in her own life and in that of others," and she let that faith-filled confidence be a prompting to action, to going forth in the name of the Lord. The Church today needs people to embrace that kind of confidence and commitment, to take to heart Pope John Paul's recognition that Saint Jeanne's message is relevant for us here and now. The Church needs people to take their place among those actively witnessing to Jesus Christ, and not live their lives as members of a witness protection program. We need to be inspired by the bravery and selfless dedication of the prayerful young woman of Brittany.

As we go forth to build up the Church and a Culture of Life, we must not fail to recognize the fullness of human dignity in all people at all times, from the moment of their conception to the last moment of natural life. Aided by the intercession of Saint Jeanne Jugan, and calling to mind her fidelity and unquestioning trust in God's will, let us go forward to fulfill the mission given us by Jesus Christ as set forth in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel: *Whatever you did for the least of your brethren, you did for me.*

CARDINAL SEÁN P. O'MALLEY, O.F.M. Cap.

Archbishop of Boston

Introduction

WRITTEN DURING A STAY WITH the Little Sisters of the Poor, in the land of corsairs,¹ the following pages take in the inner world and the high seas in the same sweep of the eye. They tell the story of a seafarer's daughter from Cancale.² The tale is intimate yet open to immensity, an adventure more exhilarating than a round-the-world sail. We are swept away by it, far, far from the pettiness and gossip of the moment. On a starless night, making way across invisible seas, we reach new lands and discover lives unknown—our own. Our lives in their full depth, our lives set free, transfigured. In a word, our true lives.

1. Corsairs were privateers commissioned by sea traders to ensure the safety of their ships as they brought goods into port. Their duties might extend to attacking and seizing foreign merchant ships, considered enemies of the state. The Breton port of Saint-Malo was home to a number of corsairs, one of whom was ennobled by King Louis XIV of France in 1708. They made a lasting mark on the culture of the region (Translator's note).

2. Cancale is a small fishing port on the northern coast of Brittany, in western France.

Some destinies speak to us more than others. They are beacons on our way, prompting us to dream of greater things. We can see in them something of ourselves, but greater, and freer. Those men and women who hold a fascination for us were themselves subject to our human condition with its contradictions, its darkness, its tragedy. By opening it up to the light, however, they lead us onward, illuminate us, and cause us to grow. They make us realize that we are carried and nourished by a reality that is deeper than the outside world.

Yet at first sight, everything in the lives of these men and women seems to distance them from us. They appear as heroes, superhuman beings. They launch into extraordinary enterprises. They show exceptional courage, boldness, and selflessness. They accomplish feats the likes of which we would not even conceive. They stand fast where “we would have arrived only to stumble straight away.”³ All in all, they are worth a hundred times more than we are.

Then suddenly they are beset by difficulties, battered by storms. We find them halted in their creative endeavor, rendered powerless, stripped, abandoned, as if thrown to the ground. They are spared nothing. They end up being treated as the least of human beings, as the weakest among us. “Here is the man!” says Pilate as he shows to the crowd the powerless Christ, whipped, covered in blood, spat upon, ridiculed. The man indeed. Only the man is left, stripped of any glory, of any persona, of any status or protection. The man, abandoned to poverty, to solitude, to darkness.

3. Paul Claudel, “Saint François,” *Oeuvre poétique* (Paris: Gallimard La Pléiade, 1957).

The poverty, solitude, and darkness into which these men and women are plunged are familiar to us; indeed, they are ours. Yet as these people take on our darkest lot, they transform it into a path of light. We can feel ourselves grow with them.

From that point of view, the life of Jeanne Jugan, foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor, is illuminating:

On the face of it all this foundress's activities are crowded into the space of three or four years. For those few years, she is and does everything. Everything begins with and from her: not only the first foundation, but those immediately born from it. If one begins to wilt, Jeanne Jugan is sent, Jeanne Jugan rushes to the rescue. She is the one to whom everyone turns; she is the one whom the public know and admire. But soon, her true role stops being an official one. And then, suddenly, she disappears. For the remaining quarter of a century of her life, she is nothing to anyone, not even to her own congregation. Miraculously forgotten, you might say.... Forgotten for a quarter of a century....⁴

Such an experience challenges us. At first, there is the attraction, the desire to accomplish a great work of a sort that can only be accomplished with creative enthusiasm. A work that mobilizes, inspires, and multiplies all the human creative energies and that, in spite of the difficulties encountered, exalts human capabilities by giving one the feeling of working with God, of doing God's work. Creating a great human and divine work always stimulates enthusiasm. It is being a creator with God.

4. Gabriel-Marie Garrone, *Poor in Spirit: The Spirituality of Jeanne Jugan* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1977), 12–13.

Then, suddenly, God seems to lose interest, if not in the work itself, at least in the one he chose to accomplish it. The chosen one is left alone by the roadside, forgotten, rejected. This is the desert experience, the void. An affecting moment when a whole life may plunge into bitterness, resentment, and revolt.

Nothing is more dramatic than this encounter of a human being with God's silence in the experience of the inner void. In those depths is the true drama of humanity played out. Nothing is decided in advance, nor can anything be taken for granted. We believe that God had called us to accomplish a work, a great work. And here we are, asked to be dispossessed of that work in order to become God's work ourselves: "In vain do you attempt this or that; it is really you, poor little brother, who are wanted."⁵

God does not force himself on us. When he wants to make his dwelling in his creature and to make himself known in the fullness of his love, he waits for consent—total, unreserved, unconditional consent. This presupposes a complete relinquishing of the self, which does not happen without resistance. It is Jacob's fight with the angel in the night. God asks human beings to let go, to give up every possible support, every certainty, to go out of our depth, so to speak. Oh, how hard it is totally to put our trust in Another, when our fate is in the balance! As long as we persist in staying at the helm of our destiny, we are under the impression that we exist of our own volition. Letting go would appear to be suicide. So God waits. Until dawn.

5. Claudel, "Saint François."

This unique experience makes plain the way God, the Infinite Being, enters a human existence and becomes one with a finite being, without substituting himself to that finite being.

Such an encounter can only occur in the deepest inner solitude. The individual is, as it were, left to his own devices, with every support taken away. Alone with free will, the seeker grapples with the Infinite Reality, until the moment when freely accepted dispossession gives way to ineffable communion. Then a new birth takes place. In the depths of the being, a hidden source begins to sing. God's tenderness fills his creature's heart:

Underneath it all, You see that there is in me something holy, something very small, O my God, which looks to You in faith.

Listen! Something that cries out to You ceaselessly, night and day!

Something stronger that tries to lift itself up towards You ...

There is in me such thirst for Your tenderness and sweetness ...

Turn Your face towards me! Father, look inside Your child! Ah, this child, will You say, this little child and My maidservant's child!⁶

The reader may have guessed that my intention is not to write a biography of Jeanne Jugan. There are some excellent ones, which faithfully tell her life's story. The following pages are an approach to her inner experience from the time she was condemned to inaction, silence, and solitude. I follow her to La Tour Saint-Joseph; I aim to enter her

6. Paul Claudel, "Psalm 85."

solitude, listen to her silence, perceive its inner turmoil, its deep resonance.

To this end I pored over the testimonies of the Little Sisters of the Poor and of people who came close to Jeanne during her long stay at La Tour. I collected the statements they gave at the beatification hearing.⁷

As I heard these testimonies and allowed them to resonate in me, I felt drawn by the depth of a life. What I was discovering was not only the calm after the storm, a smooth sea, as if asleep; it was also the bubbling of waters which, under the powerful force of the Spirit, gave birth to a new creation.

7. *Jeanne Jugan: Positio super virtutibus*, Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Rome, 1976.

Brief Chronology

- October 25, 1792** Jeanne Jugan is born at Cancale (Ille-et-Vilaine) France.
- April 1796** Her father is lost at sea.
- 1801** The Concordat between Church and state restores religious peace in France after the French Revolution.
- 1803** Presumed year of Jeanne's first Holy Communion.
- 1810** Jeanne serves Viscountess de la Choue as a kitchen maid.
- 1816** Jeanne turns down a marriage proposal from a Cancalais sailor. She tells her mother: "God wants me for himself. He is keeping me for a work that is still unknown...."

- 1817** Jeanne leaves Cancale for Saint-Servan. She joins the staff of the Le Rosais Hospital as a nursing assistant.
- 1823** Exhaustion forces her to leave Le Rosais. She is taken on by Mlle Lecoq of Saint-Servan, who welcomes her as a friend rather than a maid. Together the two women visit the poor.
- 1835** Mlle Lecoq dies. Jeanne works part time for other well-to-do families in the area.
- 1837–1838** With a friend, Françoise Aubert, Jeanne rents a flat on the second floor of No. 2, Rue du Centre, in Saint-Servan.
- Winter 1839** With her two companions, Françoise Aubert and Virginie Trédaniel, Jeanne takes in a blind and infirm elderly woman, Anne Chauvin. She gives Anne her own bed and goes to live in the attic. A second person is taken in shortly afterward. Virginie Trédaniel and a friend, Marie Jamet, assist Jeanne. This is the humble beginning of a great work. Jeanne is 47 years old.
- December 1840** Madeleine Bourges, a sick, young working girl, comes to be looked after by Jeanne. After her recovery, she joins Virginie and Marie.
- October 1841** Jeanne and her companions, with their guests, leave the flat at the Rue du

- Centre for less constricted accommodation—a ground-floor flat in the Rue de la Fontaine.
- 1841–1842** With the support and advice of the Brothers Hospitallers of Saint John of God, Jeanne starts collecting for the poor.
- February 1842** Requests for admission from the elderly increase continually. Jeanne and her followers acquire the former convent of the Daughters of the Cross.
- May 1842** Jeanne is elected superior of the small association, in the presence of Father Auguste Le Pailleur, curate of the parish of Saint-Servan. A rule is drawn up, inspired by the Rule of the Brothers Hospitallers of Saint John of God. The name “Servants of the Poor” is adopted.
- October 1842** Marie Jamet leaves home to join the small association, bringing to four the number of the “Servants of the Poor.”
- December 1843** Jeanne is re-elected as superior. Father Le Pailleur, on his own authority, annuls the election and puts Marie Jamet in her place.
- 1844** The “Servants of the Poor” change their name to “Sisters of the Poor.”
- 1845** Jeanne is awarded the Montyon Prize by the Academié Française for her work.

- 1845–1846 The news is widely reported in the national and local press.
- 1846 Jeanne collects in Rennes, where a house is founded. Jeanne goes to Dinan, where she opens a third house. The English author Charles Dickens visits. Jeanne Jugan is commended several times by the press in Rennes and Dinan.
- 1847 A house is founded in Tours.
The first general chapter of the Sisters of the Poor is held. Jeanne is not invited.
- September 1848 A long article on Jeanne’s work by Louis Veillot appears on the front page of a Catholic daily newspaper, *L’Univers*, published in Paris.
- 1848 The motherhouse and novitiate are established in Tours.
- 1849 Jeanne lives in Tours.
Foundations are established in Paris, Nantes, and Besançon.
The popular name “Little Sisters of the Poor” is definitively adopted.
- 1850 Jeanne founds a house in Angers.
Houses are opened in Bordeaux, Rouen, Nancy ...
The Little Sisters number more than 100, including novices and postulants.

- 1851 First foundation in England.
- 1852 The motherhouse and novitiate return to Rennes. Jeanne is also recalled to Rennes. She is ordered to cease all activity and break all sustained contact with benefactors. It is the start of her long retirement.
- 1853 First foundation in Belgium.
- 1854 The congregation numbers 500 Little Sisters in thirty-six houses.
- 1856 On January 30, the estate of La Tour Saint-Joseph in the village of Saint-Pern (Ille-et-Vilaine) is acquired. The motherhouse and novitiate move there in early April. Jeanne goes as well. Relegated to living among the novices and postulants, she shares their life until her death.
- 1863 First foundation in Spain.
- 1866 The Saint-Servan town council names the street of the House of the Cross after Jeanne Jugan.
- 1867 One-hundredth foundation, in Toulon.
- 1868 First foundations in Ireland, the United States, and North Africa.
- 1869 First foundation in Italy.
- 1879 Pope Leo XIII approves the constitutions of the congregation, now numbering 2,400 Little Sisters, for a period of seven years.

- August 28, 1879** Death of Jeanne Jugan, aged 86, at La Tour Saint-Joseph.
- October 3, 1982** Pope John Paul II beatifies Jeanne Jugan.
- October 11, 2009** Pope Benedict XVI canonizes Jeanne Jugan.