

# LITTLE SISTERS

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during the outdoor Mass. “We take this opportunity to give thanks, especially to God, for the witness of the Little Sisters here in central Indiana.”

## A two-fold charism

When the Little Sisters arrived in Indianapolis, their order was only 34 years old. It was founded by St. Jeanne Jugan in the Brittany region of France in 1839.

The order’s charism is two-fold, according to Mother Maria Christine Lynch, the current superior



Archbishop Charles C. Thompson receives the offertory gift of wine from Carol Gaal, a resident of the St. Augustine Home, during a Mass on the grounds of the St. Augustine Home in Indianapolis during the Aug. 26 Mass. (Photos by Natalie Hoefler)

at the St. Augustine Home.

First is “this compassionate gaze on the needy, elderly poor, bringing the love of Jesus to those who really need it at that period of time in their life,” she said.

The sisters don’t just build structures where care is administered to “low-income elderly of at least 65 years of age regardless of race or religion” (according to the St. Augustine Home website).

Rather, as the website explains, the sisters’ mission is to create “a home where [residents] will be welcomed as Christ, cared for as family and accompanied with dignity until God calls them to himself.”

The second charism of the Little Sisters “is that of begging or collecting,” said Mother Maria Christine. “That’s a part of our charism that some people perhaps don’t realize.

“Jeanne Jugan understood she was to beg from God first that she might give of herself, then to beg for others the graces that they might have that same opportunity to give.”

From the start, the Little Sisters have sought support—whether financial, food, physical items or more—from individuals and businesses in the community. This act “invites others to know the gift of giving from what God has given to them, because everything is a gift from God,” Mother Maria Christine explained.

“There’s a wonderful quote in our constitution, our rule of life, that expresses the charism of collecting,” she added. “It says, ‘God has confided each person to the love of all.’ It’s an individual call, but it’s a call and a mandate that’s meant for the whole world, however we witness to it in our own lives.”

## From six to 6,500

After arriving in Indianapolis by invitation of Bishop Jacques M. De Saint-Palais of what was then the Vincennes Diocese, the four Little Sisters got right to work in exercising their charisms.

Msgr. Jean-Francois Augustin de Bessonies, then diocesan vicar general and pastor of St. John the Evangelist Parish in Indianapolis, helped the sisters lease two small homes near the church.

“We think St. Augustine Home might have been named to honor him,” said Mother Maria Christine.



Religious of the Little Sisters of the Poor sing during a Mass on the grounds of the St. Augustine Home in Indianapolis on Aug. 26 celebrating the 150th anniversary of their order ministering in central Indiana. Mother Maria Christine Lynch, superior of the home, is second from right.

The religious women immediately took in six elderly in need. Their ministry quickly outgrew the small space, so they purchased from the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods a two-and-a-half acre plot on the city’s near-northeast side. The sisters and residents moved to their newly constructed home there in June.

They soon outgrew that home, too.

In 1878, construction began on a large, three-story brick home on the same plot of land. The address was 502 E. Vermont Street, and there the St. Augustine Home remained until 1967. The Indiana Historical Bureau erected an historical marker there in 2017.

By 1962, the aging home was no longer able to meet the modern needs of the residents and the sisters.



Archbishop Charles C. Thompson prays the eucharistic prayer during a Mass on the grounds of the St. Augustine Home in Indianapolis on Aug. 26 celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Little Sisters of the Poor ministering to the elderly poor in central Indiana. Concelebrating with the archbishop are Father Steven Schwab, left, Msgr. Joseph Schaedel, Father James Farrell, Father Jude Newaigwa and Father Ben Okonkwo. Kneeling are transitional Deacon Michael Schultz of the Archdiocese of Louisville, Ky., left, and Father James Brockmeier.



A resident of the St. Augustine Home receives the Eucharist from a Little Sister of the Poor during a Mass on the grounds of the home in Indianapolis on Aug. 26.

Through fundraising, land was purchased on the corner of West 86th Street and Township Line Road on the city’s northwest side, and construction began on the current home. The sisters and the residents moved there in November 1967.

Since taking in the first six seniors in 1873, the Little Sisters have welcomed and cared for some 6,500 elderly through the St. Augustine Home.

That figure includes the 61 current residents cared for by 11 Little Sisters, with the help of staff and volunteers. “I love it here,” said 11-year resident Carol Gaal. “The family spirit, the sisters, Mass every day, morning and evening prayer. I couldn’t be more pleased.”

## ‘Our Lord’s closest companions’

Gaal called it “an absolute honor” to carry the offertory gifts during the anniversary Mass on the front lawn of St. Augustine Home’s 23-acre campus.

Before the Mass, Mother Maria Christine welcomed the hundreds who were gathered for the event.

“Down through the decades, there’s been generations of families, businesses, friends and residents who have touched the lives of the Little Sisters of the Poor,” she said.

“Today we want to thank you for the trust that you have placed in us ... and the way that you have made us feel loved and a part of your lives. Without you, we could not accomplish the mission that the Lord has confided to us.”

Since the order’s founding in 1839, that mission has involved seeking “the divine treasures of the kingdom of God that can be found only in word, sacrament and service, especially in service to the poor, the sick and the elderly,” Archbishop Thompson said in his homily.

For the last century-and-a-half in central Indiana, he said, the sisters “have sought to encounter Jesus Christ in each person. They have served, dedicated in a life of service and respecting the human dignity and sacredness



Religious of the Little Sisters of the Poor pose on May 20, 2017, beside a state historical marker unveiled that day at 520 E. Vermont St. in Indianapolis, where the order’s home for the elderly poor in Indianapolis was located from 1873-1967. Standing at left is Mother Mary Vincent, then-superior of St. Augustine Home. (File photo by Natalie Hoefler)



St. Augustine Home Guild member Sara Wissler, center, watches as a girl plays a game during a picnic on the grounds of the St. Augustine Home in Indianapolis on Aug. 26.

of life and those who society would prefer to cast aside or even at times discard.”

It was for providing such respect and dignity that the Little Sisters received the archdiocese’s Archbishop Edward T. O’Meara Respect Life Award in 1993.

St. Augustine Home board member Timothy O’Donnell sees “moral clarity” in the culture of life the sisters cultivate.

“In today’s setting, there’s a lot of confusion out there,” the member of St. Mary Parish in North Vernon said after the Mass. “And when anyone looks at the Little Sisters and their love and devotion and lifelong dedication and service to others, it brings moral clarity.

“When you meet one of the Little Sisters, you can’t help but feel as if in a very special way you’re meeting one of our Lord’s closest companions. They’re full of joy, they’re full of energy—and their sense of humor is absolutely wonderful!”

## ‘More joy in giving than receiving’

The picnic reflected that sense of joy. Every child received several toys, and areas for games, face-painting, music and dancing dotted the lawn. Applause broke out as a trio of biplanes soared overhead in several passes scheduled as a surprise during the event.

St. Augustine Home Guild member Sara Wissler paused to watch the planes before continuing to help at a game booth. For 56 years, the guild has supported the Little Sisters’ work at the home.

“One of the things I do is bed-making,” she said. “That’s my favorite part because we get to meet the residents. All the residents here are such a joy, and so are the sisters.”

Little Sister Rose Marie Kietter smiled as she watched Wissler help a child choose a toy. Sister Rose Marie, who has served at St. Augustine Home for two-and-a-half years, took a moment from the festivities to reflect on life as a Little Sister.



In this file photo from the late 1960s, religious women of the Little Sisters of the Poor show off the construction of the St. Augustine Home on the northwest side of Indianapolis. The home has been in operation there since 1967. (File photo)

“It’s very rewarding,” said the 63-year-professed religious. “You’re giving, and there’s more joy in giving than receiving, and the Lord always rewards you.”

## Assuring ‘the future here’ for years to come

Even as the Little Sisters celebrated 150 years of service through the St. Augustine Home—now the only home operated by the order in Indiana—they were looking to the future.

Mother Julie Marie Horseman, superior of the Little Sisters’ Chicago Province to which St. Augustine Home belongs, made a surprise announcement about that future at the end of the Mass.

“I’m happy to announce that we have begun preparations for the building of a new home here on our current property,” she said to enthusiastic applause. No time frame was announced for the project, which will include demolition of the current home.

Later, Mother Maria Christine shared more information about the decision with *The Criterion*.

“The current building is approaching 60 years,” she said. “The sheer size, difficulty repairing outdated equipment and safety code requirements are all factors. “More importantly, though, are the changing needs and desires of an aging population.

“For the Little Sisters, accompanying older persons in living the remaining years God has given them—especially at end of life—carries both challenges and opportunities nowadays. We see the need to adapt in order to protect and nurture life.”

She said the sisters are excited about the future plans and about continuing to serve the elderly in need in Indiana.

“We have a responsibility to assure the future here,” said Mother Maria Christine. “It’s a continuum that we never become complacent [about], that whatever good comes is not just [because of] us but all the gracious people God puts in our path.”

She noted that, as the sisters researched St. Augustine Home’s history in preparation for the 150th anniversary, they discovered a quote by “a gentleman who was very much involved in this property and the building of this home back in 1968.

“On more than one occasion, he said, ‘Hoosiers must be the nicest people in the world.’

“We couldn’t agree more.”



Little Sisters of the Poor Sisters Rose Marie Kietter, left, and Celestine Meade smile with Alexa Healey, who had her face painted during a picnic on the grounds of the St. Augustine Home in Indianapolis on Aug. 26. The picnic and preceding Mass marked 150 years of the order ministering to the elderly in central Indiana.



Timothy O’Donnell, a board member of the Little Sisters of the Poor’s St. Augustine Home in Indianapolis, and his wife Maureen, both members of St. Mary Parish in North Vernon, talk with Mother Julie Horseman, provincial superior of the Little Sisters’ Chicago Province, during an Aug. 26 gathering marking the 150th anniversary of the order serving in central Indiana.

(For more information or to support the Little Sisters of the Poor and the St. Augustine Home, go to [littlesistersofthepoorindianapolis.org](http://littlesistersofthepoorindianapolis.org) or call 317-415-5767.) †