



Little Sisters of the Poor

## **Media Alert:**

### **Little Sisters of the Poor Speak at USCCB Congressional Reception regarding the HHS Mandate**

***By Sister Constance Carolyn, LSP***

I'd like you to meet Anna. She is 91-years old and has been a Resident of our home in Chicago for eight years. We knew Anna for several years before she came to live with us. We often saw her at Holy Name Cathedral, where she spent her days serving as the unofficial sacristan. But Anna didn't just hang out at the cathedral – she lived there – in the basement.

Over time we befriended Anna and would periodically invite her to come live at St. Mary's Home. Her worn out clothing, matted hair and bent posture made it obvious to us that Anna could use some help taking care of herself.

But for several years Anna declined our invitations. Though very poor in our eyes, she felt needed at the Cathedral. She had her routine ... and her independence.

Finally Anna agreed that she could no longer make it on her own and so in 2004 she moved to our home in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. During her admission intake we discovered that this humble old woman who lived in the church basement had earned both bachelor's and master's degrees in nursing, and that she had worked for the Chicago board of education helping to develop the Head Start program. Anna had a personal history and accomplishments; she also had a unique personality.

Once at St. Mary's Home, Anna continued to dress in her somewhat mismatched, bohemian style. She took pride in what she referred to as her "sensitivity" to the different cultures she encountered among the Residents and staff of the home. For as long as she was able Anna volunteered in the kitchen. Now, nearly bent in half, she spends most of the day in the chapel; she is probably there right now, praying.

Like Anna, the majority of elderly persons admitted to our homes are female – because women typically outlive men by about 13 years – and most wait until they are in their 80's or 90's before coming to live with us, because they typically try to make it on their own as long as possible.

Whether they voice it or not, all are seeking a home where they will be respected as individuals, where their personal stories and their preferences will be heard, where they will find security, kindness and personalized care, even while maintaining as much independence as possible.

This is our mission. We welcome the neediest elderly as Christ himself, remembering the words of our foundress, Saint Jeanne Jugan, who said, “Never forget that the poor are Our Lord.” With the help of a vast network of collaborators we care for them as members of our own family and accompany them with dignity and compassion until God calls them to himself.

Because we care for the poor, most of our Residents are Medicaid recipients. Yet Medicaid covers only about half of our operating expenses. We rely heavily on private philanthropy to make ends meet. Obtaining adequate funding to provide the quality of care for which our homes are known is a constant struggle.

The HHS Mandate threatens to take our financial challenges to an entirely new level. The fines to be imposed for non-compliance with the Mandate represent an unsustainable financial burden. This is the greatest threat we have faced in over 140 years of service to the elderly in the United States.

Beyond the HHS Mandate, we Little Sisters of the Poor have serious concerns related to broader issues of religious liberty. If the federal government succeeds in enforcing the Mandate, what is to stop it from rationing health care to seniors, or including euthanasia on the list of required “preventive services” as a way of eliminating the costs associated our rapidly aging population? We Little Sisters fear that one day we could be forced to participate in assisted suicide or euthanasia, acts we find morally reprehensible. This would mean the end of our mission in the United States.

We have been caring for the elderly poor here in the U.S. since 1868. The first Little Sisters to arrive on American soil, immigrants from France, were amazed at the warm welcome and generosity of the people of this country. Here in Washington Congress provided much-needed funding on three separate occasions in the 1870’s and 1880’s, helping us build and expand our first home on H Street. This financial support enabled us to care for native Washingtonians, European immigrants and newly emancipated African Americans alike. The Little Sisters of the Poor came to America – and have stayed here – to care for the neediest elderly of all faiths and cultures. Not because they are Catholic, but because we are.

We have never faced discrimination or religious persecution in this great nation. But as Little Sisters of the Poor we are not strangers to religious intolerance. Our foundress was born at the height of the French Revolution and established our congregation in its aftermath. Our Sisters have been forced to leave numerous countries, including China, Myanmar and Hungary, because of religious intolerance. We pray that the United States will not be added to this list. During the Fortnight of Freedom we pray that God will continue to bless America and our mission to the poorest elderly of this nation for many years to come.

*Editor’s note: The basis of this column comes from testimony by Sister Constance Carolyn, LSP, on behalf of the over 300 Little Sisters of the Poor and 2,500 elderly Residents of their homes in the United States, at the USCCB Congressional Reception regarding the HHS Mandate.*