



GSR in the Classroom: CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

LESSON – CONFINED SISTERS SEEK WAYS TO HELP OTHERS

BEFORE YOU READ:

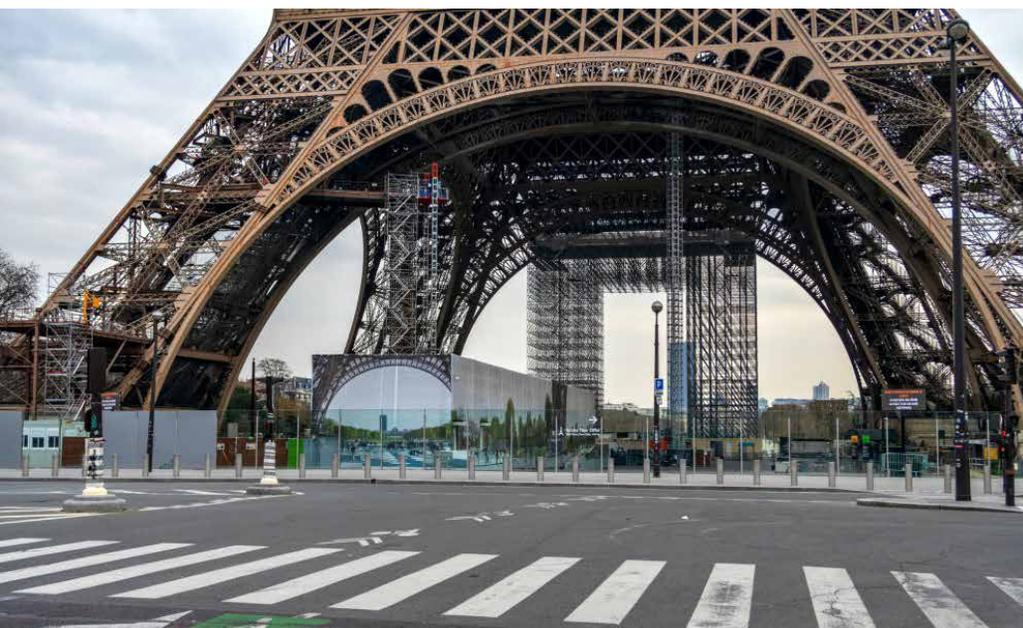
France has about one-fifth the population of the United States. Coronavirus began spreading across Europe earlier than in the United States and initially was affecting a much higher proportion of the population of France and other nations. Its threat is greater among certain types of people, including the elderly, those with other health conditions and the poor.

Alone, or with a family member, discuss:

- How safe do you feel from risk of exposure to coronavirus? Name some people you worry about, either those at greater risk or sick with COVID-19.
- What precautions are you and the people you live with taking? How do these precautions help other people?

Keep in mind while you read:

Though you may seem especially lonely these days, you're not alone. Sisters in France also have to cope with this crisis. Many older sisters have spent their lives helping poor and elderly people and are finding new ways to serve them.



THE EIFFEL TOWER IS SEEN MARCH 17 DURING THE CORONAVIRUS LOCKDOWN IN PARIS.
(DREAMSTIME/ULYSSEPIXEL)

CONFINED FRENCH SISTERS SEEK WAYS TO REMAIN CLOSE TO THE VULNERABLE

BY [ELISABETH AUVILLAIN](#)

March 25, 2020

PARIS — “Am I my brother’s keeper?” ([Genesis 4:9](#))

“This is the question that we must all ask ourselves at the moment,” said Sr. [Véronique Margron](#), provincial prior of the [Dominican Sisters of the Presentation](#) and president of the [Conférence des Religieuses et Religieuses de France](#), France’s conference for men and women

religious. “We can continue to destroy each other ... if we don’t follow instructions” when it comes to the coronavirus spreading across the globe.

She said she worries about how Christians can continue to be close to the vulnerable: “What support the church provides in normal times no longer exists, is no longer directly accessible.”

As of March 25, France had 22,302 [confirmed cases of COVID-19](#), and 1,100 people have died so far. The number of victims is still increasing.

Margron recalls the confinement instructions given by the French government on March 12: no public celebrations, and during intracommunity celebrations, strict compliance with social distancing measures of 1 meter (a little more than 3 feet). These rules are also to be respected as much as possible in the life of the community.

These safety measures are widely expected to be extended well into April.

“As our chapel is very large, we can easily stay away from each other, as we’ve been told. We have the impression that there are many of us, as in the past,” said Sister Marie Joseph de la Passion, a [Little Sister of the Poor](#) who lives in La Tour, the **motherhouse** of her community in France, in Saint-Pern in Brittany. “In the **refectory**, we only occupy every other seat of the tables.”

While understanding the restrictions and following them carefully, Sister Marie Joseph said she was sorry the community could no longer welcome groups of people who regularly came to La Tour to pray or attend Sunday Mass.

The Little Sisters of the Poor run houses for elderly people who have little money. Today, there are 465 sisters in France in charge of 36 houses.

“In all our homes, the staff makes a point to pay more attention than ever. We have to make sure we do not make elderly people’s feelings of loneliness worse than normal, especially since visitors are not allowed anymore,” Sister Marie Joseph said.

These concerns are the same in other communities of sisters that work in other fields, such as schools and health centers. In homes for the elderly, where some older sisters live in community with residents, their

VOCABULARY

provincial prior: a regional leader of a congregation of sisters

motherhouse: the house in which a congregation of sisters was founded and where its leader lives

refectory: a room used for meals in a religious institution

mother superior: the leader of a local community of sisters

apostolate: a particular ministry performed by a religious congregation

fraternity: a sense of brotherhood or sisterhood

missionary: going out to serve with a specific purpose

presence is essential, especially because visits have been prohibited there for the past two weeks.

“We have two communities in an old people’s home of 80 residents” in the west of France that has been relatively spared, said Sr. Eliane Loiseau, **mother superior** for the [Missionary Sisters of the Gospel](#) for France.

Since all visitors are forbidden, the elderly can feel even more alone and become desperate. The sisters continue to stay in touch with confined old people, both lay and religious, whom they used to visit regularly, Margron said.

“Contacts are made by phone; an invisible network continues to be present. Basic solidarity continues,” she said. “I am amazed to see how the elderly sisters keep ties with loved ones, family and friends.”

“As for the elderly who live at home on their own,



SR. VÉRONIQUE MARGRON
(PROVIDED PHOTO)

there is a danger that they will feel even more alone,” she added. “The elderly, often worried, are even more worried at the moment. Loneliness is compounded by despair.”

“For people who live alone, the link with the outside world is often very fragile: It can be a helper who comes in every day,” Margron

said. “What happens if she is sick or simply unable to come for work?”

There is an upside, Loiseau pointed out.

“This crisis, which forces us to use modern, virtual means of communication, has enabled some older sisters to familiarize themselves with these technological instruments that frightened them and to use them to keep in touch with others,” she said. “We all work from home, we stay in our communities, where we are confined. We have video conferences, we send documents to each other, talk a lot on the telephone.”

More than half of the nuns in France are more than 80 years old. Most of them can’t do the traditional work of nurses as sisters did in previous epidemics, even though many of them continue to run health facilities where basic care is provided.

“In my community, we all have health concerns and cannot directly help the victims of COVID-19,” said Sr. Marie Hélène Halligon of the [Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd](#) community. “We pray together morning and evening. We watch Mass on the Catholic channel every evening at 6:15 p.m., and at the time of Communion, we take Communion with the hosts that a priest left us last week in anticipation of confinement.”

Members of her community live in apartments in Strasbourg, and the neighbors are helping each other. For example, French authorities have asked each person who wants to leave home to fill out a certificate indicating the purpose of his or her errand — buying groceries or walking the dog, for example. This

certificate is valid for one hour and allows a person to go out but no further than 1 kilometer (.62 mile) away from their home.

“In our building, someone printed and deposited a stack of these certificates. The residents of the building, who do not all have a printer, can have it when they want to go shopping,” Halligon said.

For someone like Halligon, who is [committed to the fight against human trafficking](#), the necessary confinement can have disastrous consequences.

“I worry that the violent men are confined,” she said. “In such a situation, they may turn even more violent, and we must help the women who are in their grip.” The French government has posted to social media the phone numbers to call in case of domestic violence.

Every sister agrees that this crisis also provides an opportunity to question how people live the present moment.

“I have invited the members of our congregation to reflect on what time means: the time I give, the time I lose,” Loiseau said.

Margron said she is worried about the new challenges created by this period for Christians, challenges that often are concrete. “The most crucial question is that of funerals: If someone close to you dies, what do you do? The operational support is no longer there. How do we continue to show our presence? How can we exercise our **apostolate**, in what other way?”

New rules of confinement state that no more than 20 mourners can gather in a church for a funeral service.

On March 23, French President Emmanuel Macron invited the heads of the main religions in France to discuss how to celebrate funerals while being careful to avoid risks of contagion by the virus. The faith leaders welcomed the initiative.



SR. MARIE HÉLÈNE HALLIGON
(ELISABETH AUVILLAIN)

“When I see how our secular system of government cares about the role of religious celebrations, what these ceremonies do for the common good, the service they provide for believers and nonbelievers alike, I find this magnificent,” Margron said. “In the midst of this chaos, of all that it has to do, in the midst of its duties and worries, the government shows that it is concerned about ways to give support to people mourning. This, to me, is a beautiful gesture. It’s up to us religious men and women to be up to the task.”



Elisabeth Auvillain is a freelance journalist living in Paris.

AFTER YOU READ: Alone, or with a family member, discuss:

- How are the restrictions in France similar to yours? How are they different?
- How do coronavirus precautions affect the lifestyle of elderly people?
- How would it feel to be confined when you’ve spent your life serving other people?

SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT:

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” is a question that Cain asked God in the earliest pages of the Bible, trying to distract God from the fact that Cain had killed his brother, Abel. Jesus later answers this question clearly with a story, describing how we will ultimately be judged on how we care for those who are hungry, sick and vulnerable in many other ways. In the story of the last judgment, Jesus says:

“Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”
Matthew 25:40 (read the whole story [here](#))

Jesus not only insists that we are responsible for our brothers and sisters, but expands our perspective on who they are. They might be strangers. They might be poor. They might need what we have. He says our care for them shows our love for him.

Read [Matthew 25:31-46](#), then consider:

- Jesus lists just a few conditions that people struggle with. Based on this article and other things you’ve observed, what are other ways in which people are vulnerable?
- Think about one vulnerable person or group that you’ve observed in news about the coronavirus pandemic. How can you care for them as your sister or brother?

THE CHURCH'S CALL

The church promotes the “[option for the poor and vulnerable](#).” We teach that our society can be judged on how our most vulnerable members are faring. Our world is challenged by deepening divisions between rich and poor, but our faith reminds us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

Pope Francis says that we often don't take the story of the last judgment to heart or allow it to change our lives. He writes:

*“How dangerous and harmful this is, for it makes us lose our amazement, our excitement and our zeal for living the Gospel of **fraternity** and justice! ... By her very nature the Church is **missionary**; she abounds in effective charity and a compassion which understands, assists and promotes.”*

Pope Francis, in [Evangelii Gaudium](#) [179]

Alone or with a partner, consider:

- Whose needs do you tend to put first – yours or others'?
- Are people, by nature, self-centered? In what ways can it be challenging to belong to a church whose nature is to help others?
- Why is it more important than ever to put the needs of vulnerable people above our own?

SYNERGY WITH SISTERS

Just as in France, many sisters around the world are elderly and vulnerable. Most of these sisters spent years working for little money. Neither they nor their communities can afford to meet the costs of health care and other needs. In the United States, the Retirement Fund for Religious supports both women and men religious. Click [here](#) to learn more about how the fund helps sisters and how you can support it.

ACT

Reach out to a local group of sisters (your diocesan vocations office should have contact information about nearby congregations), or a local facility or charity that cares for the elderly. Many elderly people are lonely because they can't have visitors during the pandemic, while others might be running short on food or supplies.

Some ideas could include:

- Email messages of hope and support.
- Record yourself (and classmates) singing or playing instruments. Send individual song files, or edit it into a concert.
- Get a list of residents' first names and birthdays. Send birthday songs or greetings, or post a birthday greeting sign outside the facility.
- Explore whether facility staff members can arrange video chats with residents.

Before you do anything, contact the facility staff to see if there are restrictions to protect their residents in terms of confidentiality or safety. For example, a facility might not accept cards or donated supplies.

PRAY

Help us, Lord,
to see you in the faces
of our sisters and brothers.
Open our eyes to see them,
especially those who are
the most difficult to see.
In these challenging days,
connect us through your Spirit
to the poor, the homeless, the elderly.
Help us to look beyond the barriers
of our differences, and even quarantines.
Protect them, Lord,
and give them hope
through the power of the love
that we share in you.
Amen