

# Moments of Grace

Finding the good in a pandemic:  
Reflections by Sisters around the world

An Advent and Christmas gift from:



**GLOBAL SISTERS** REPORT

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# Greetings from Global Sisters Report

**This is an Advent and Christmas season like no other.**

**We wondered how to address this in our annual gift to readers during this most special time of year. We know that many prayer and holiday traditions will be altered or suspended because of pandemic restrictions. Celebrations may be muted, poignant, even painful as we recall those missing from our families and communities and keep in mind so many who are in need.**

**Yet Advent, the start of a new liturgical year and preparation for the coming of Emmanuel ("God with us"), always brings that promise fulfilled at Christmas: God IS with us. We need God more than ever in these difficult times. So we wanted to share some reflections by sisters during this pandemic that touched us, made us smile, reminded us of joy amid our sorrow – and to cherish, even in this most difficult time, moments of grace.**

**Blessings to you and all those you hold dear this Advent, Christmas and New Year.**

**All of us at Global Sisters Report**

# A virus arrived, and changed our world

BY LUCÍA AURORA HERRERÍAS GUERRA | OCT. 6, 2020



(Unsplash/Phil Botha)

... and a virus arrived. Nobody knows exactly how it happened, but it arrived. And it spread ... spread. It found thousands of welcoming human organisms, available — perhaps carefree, taking refuge in “nothing can happen to me.”

And so it spread. Little by little, maybe long before we realized that it was there... on the prowl, looking for cells in which to take refuge, to multiply.

Combat strategies were not clear; either we didn't know or the virus found a way each time to jump all barriers, but it was slowly revealing the tactics it used.

With so much confusion, many people thought it was an invention, a myth, that it wasn't so lethal after all — that there was no need to take such good care of yourself, anyway. And the virus was taking advantage of our carelessness to get farther and farther, getting to more bodies, crossing all borders!

The virus blocked us. Like a sudden stop in the face of an unexpected obstacle on the road. Many things that seemed essential went on hold. So many others that we believed unnecessary became vital.

We suddenly realized that grandparents were important, that hugging and kissing give meaning to our lives. We discovered that self-sufficiency is a fiction. It is one thing to isolate yourself because you want to, and it is another thing not to be able to gather your friends, even if you want.

In our cities, many of us were able to stay locked in, but we knew that without the farmers we would have starved. We discovered that having a house where you can take shelter and to count on your financial savings so that you do not depend on each day's earnings were luxuries and privileges the poorest do not share.

New heroes emerged, most of them with no names or surnames. Confinement unveiled the depths of each person. It revealed whether a family was hell or paradise: There was no escape.

Our weaknesses were made clear in the face of an assault by a tiny, undetectable and aggressive RNA chain. O human being, you can do so much and so little! Who you are? Who are we?

In many places, animals recovered their habitats,

possessively, walking like tourists through empty cities ... What will they do when we want to recover that empire that we took from them?

Possibly when this is all over, we will have learned our lessons and we will be better persons. Or perhaps, poisons that corrode us deep within will make us feel their effects again, those effects that were only waiting for the time to reactivate their power. For many, the violence that will finally come out is only accumulating — that violence that is already rising as racism, as class hatred, as excessive use of force.

Other men and women will come out of this time with a renewed awareness and conviction that we are brothers and sisters, rediscovering that we are members of the body of the Total Christ, of the Cosmic Christ, and that nothing human, nothing in the universe is strange to us!

As a touchstone, the pandemic will show who you are, what you are, what is moving you ... the secret “thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” will come to light (Luke 2:35). You will see which side you are on in the development of the world, in the evolution of life. It will be evident to you and all if you are a bearer of destruction or a sower of life.

It will be seen whether or not you belong to the new world that will inevitably come, because there is Someone who has said it and is always faithful to his promises:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth disappeared, and the sea vanished. And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared and ready, like a bride dressed to meet her husband. I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne: Now God’s home is with people! He will live with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared. Then the one who sits on the throne said, “And now I make all things new!” He also said to me, “Write this, because these words are true and can be trusted.” [Revelation 21:1-5]

*[Sr. Lucía Aurora Herrerías Guerra was president of the Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity from 2012 to 2018. She is currently living in Mexico.]*

Read online at [GlobalSistersReport.org/node/193101](https://GlobalSistersReport.org/node/193101).

# Finding comfort in a time of anxiety

BY LAURA HAMMEL | AUG. 27, 2020



Sr. Laura Hammel gardening this year in the yard of the Sisters of St. Clare convent in Saginaw, Michigan (Provided photo)

This new year brought a change in our lives that none of us expected nor could have anticipated. The 2019 novel coronavirus pandemic has been an unseen threat for several months. Even the terms used to describe it are extreme: “unprecedented time,” “devastating impact.” This pandemic, like 9/11, is seared into our corporate memory.

For me, the strangeness of not visually seeing the danger is most unsettling. The usual warning signs of impending danger are not there. If this had been a physical invasion or a natural disaster, there would have been warning sirens. Instead, we heard how the virus was affecting people in China, but I did not think it would come here! Surely, we have better health management in our developed country. This assumption proved to be one of my many mistaken biases.

One day everything went quiet, except for the news reporters. Their voices were the sirens. However, my neighborhood seemed unusually quiet. The road out-

side our house that leads to three schools was quiet.

During this halt to all activity, our contemplative life was altered and stilled as well. The phone fell silent ... even the robocalls stopped. Visitors no longer dropped by, and the amount of mail declined. However, emails asking for help increased. People sought prayers for family, health and finances.

Although the outside world became quiet, my inner world was not. I found that I had deep anxiety about this world pandemic. I watched as the number of deaths went up in the world and especially in my own state and those where friends live. I watched the stock market numbers to see where the “confidence level” was in our country, and I waited for the infection curve to flatten.

It was clear to me that this infection crisis had tested my inner quiet and in a way, my faith. Not my faith in God, but rather, my faith in God’s methods. Why so many deaths, especially among the weak, the vulnerable, and now, the children? As the virus impinges on our

lives, I feel anger because we can't control it. I can't see friends who are dying from COVID-19 complications.

Easter came, and I hardly noticed it. I missed Holy Week and all the symbols and rituals for energy and life. I resonated with the homilies about the empty tomb, but not for reasons the preacher gave. I felt left with the empty tomb and no visit from the Gardener telling me all was well, "He is risen."

After getting through that crisis of Easter and video streaming liturgies, I knew that I had to find something to comfort me and help me to see my faith from a new perspective.

In my collection of things "to do someday," I found a set of DVDs, "Evolution and Christogenesis" by Ilia Delio, a Franciscan sister and scientist. As I worked my way through the series, I felt my spirit challenged. Delio led me to see that our world and universe is in constant change. This change is all around us. We see it in all the activities of nature, particularly now as the pandemic travels throughout the world.

I began to see that my challenge is to see through my anxieties and to trust in God's ways and methods. One of the basic themes of Scripture is to see the world in new ways, "See I make all things new!" (Revelation 21.5); "See, I am doing a new thing!" (Isaiah 43:19); "See, I will create new heavens and a new earth" (Isaiah 65.17). One thing that I do see now is that what is happening in a place far away like China, does and will affect me. We are all very connected.

This is not a new idea for me, however, Delio's thoughts came to me at this particular historical moment in life as I am coping with the pandemic. My awareness of the power of nature, seen, and unseen, has deepened. To see that God is in all of this has helped me to enfold faith into my anxiety and soften the fear that I felt.

Seeing the world as Delio and many of our Scriptures point out has given me a stronger sense of meaning and faith that I didn't have before. Previously I

would read about pandemics in other countries, but they seemed a crisis far from me. Now I must face a crisis that touches me directly.

The virus epidemic has forced me to slow down. I am grateful for the time to see the world and my faith in a new way. Fortunately, spring came again and the cold winds settle down. I got to attend to yard cleaning and fertilizing the garden. It was again time for me to put up bird houses and feeders. It drew me back to the — seen and unseen — powers among us.

I see others, like myself who "wanted out" to walk the paths, to feel the sun and to breathe the air. We left our tombs of "self-isolating" to experience the power of the life all around us, while being careful to stay masked when necessary and to respect social distancing so as not to endanger others during this time.

We are well over half way through this unprecedented year. This virus has halted our usual activity and helped me to notice the "seen and unseen" gifts and challenges present with us. Among these gifts is the messenger in the garden of our lives saying, "I am risen." These words open my eyes to see the palpable activity of God present in our world, the divine activity that can absorb many of our anxieties and fears and bring us comfort.

*[Laura Hammel is a member of the Sisters of St. Clare, a Poor Clare community in Saginaw, Michigan. In addition to the prayer ministry in her diocese, she has developed and maintained a website introducing different prayer forms useful at certain times of the year. These include an Advent calendar, contemplation using Stations of the Cross, a Pentecost Novena and Mysteries of the Rosary.]*

Read online at [GlobalSistersReport.org/node/192219](https://GlobalSistersReport.org/node/192219).

# Into the woods

BY JOAN SAURO | APRIL 20, 2020

Her voice over the phone was insistent. "Quick, take your camera over to the woods. Go. Now."

"Go? You do know there's a pandemic out there!"

"Not in the woods there isn't."

I thought about that a minute and then said, "OK, I'm going."

It was midmorning on a dark day with no sun to be seen and not many people either. And then there were the formidable woods, located, aptly enough, on Woods Road.

With camera swung around my back to free my hands, I approached the silent woods. The climb up from the sidewalk was steep. Once into the woods, I had to negotiate great depressions of earth, ravines filled with old leaves covering who knew what. Roots rose suddenly and twisted in and out of the underbrush. The deeper the woods, the thicker the brambles.

Hand over hand, I climbed, grabbing hold of a bush here, a tree branch there. Of course, I fell, got up and made my slow way, looking for what I had no idea.

I felt like the poet Dante, lost in a "dark wood, a wild and rough and stubborn wood." Which was a fair description of the coronavirus, as well. It is dark, indiscriminate, stubborn, rampant. In front of me, deformed tree trunks hunched over like scarecrows, a reminder of the sick and dying. And I wondered what my friend could be looking at, shut up in her fifth-floor apartment on the other side of the woods.

I thought of Robert Frost, stopping by woods and remarking, Whose woods these are I think I know.

I knew as well. The woods I was in were nobody's. They belonged to themselves. And I, with my camera slung over my back, felt like an intruder. Still, when the way back is as difficult as the way forward, you plod on.

In time, I came to a clearing, stopped a minute and caught my breath. Then I looked up. And there it was — the sun — transformed into a host held in a monstrance of tree branches.

I stood still and stared and reminded myself that I was in a forest, not a church. That I was looking at the sun held in tree branches, not at the body of Christ held in a gold monstrance.

And yet I felt blessed. I stood in the middle of a woods not of trees only. Bathed in light not of the sun only. I did not want to come down, even as those Apostles (Matthew 17: 1-8) did not want to leave their



Joan Sauro

mount. They'd rather set up tents!

In a terrible irony, we were setting up tents, but they were to house the sick when hospital rooms were full. And I on a mount just stood there and looked and looked and looked. Finally, I asked for a blessing on every last one of us.

Then I slowly turned around and started down the steep hill. I slid, fell, got up, grabbed hold of brush and branches, just as before. But the way down was different. This time, I knew that God had my back. That God had all of our backs, even as we had each other's, for however long this day of reckoning lasts.

*[Joan Sauro, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, publishes widely in the Catholic press. "We were called Sister" (U.S. Catholic) was awarded first place for Best Essay 2014 by the CPA.]*

Read online at [GlobalSistersReport.org/node/189259](https://GlobalSistersReport.org/node/189259).

# From South Korea amid pandemic: prayer, of course, but also snacks

BY MICHAEL SUJIN YOO | APRIL 27, 2020



From the Korean: "Wear the mask. Wash your hands thoroughly, We are rooting for you, healthcare professionals!" (Artwork by the novitiate sisters of the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters in Busan, South Korea)

We did not expect the coronavirus outbreak to be such a global crisis. South Korea was the second country that suffered from the crisis, after China. At this moment, we are still struggling to overcome the coronavirus outbreak. Our preventive measures have included the suspension of public Mass since mid-February.

When the plague was widespread in the Middle Ages, many religious men and women went out of the cloisters or the monasteries to take care of patients, and finally died with them. Back then, we did not know yet about germs or viruses because we did not have advanced equipment like microscopes. But today, we are given protocols on how to avoid the spread of the virus; one of them is through social distancing (some say it is not social distancing, but physical distancing in social solidarity). It is really important in this situation, and all we can do is to pray for patients and health care professionals on the front line.

Thus, since Ash Wednesday, all religious women in Korea have dedicated their daily prayers to overcom-

ing the coronavirus outbreak, starting with Mass and prayers for this intention. But when we heard from medical staff and front liners who were struggling in the increasingly serious situation, we felt so sorry for the fact that we could only pray.

Then we learned that the committee of the Archdiocese of Seoul sent snacks to cheer up the staff of the KCDC (Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). We realized that we could do something to help. So, we called the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and a COVID-19 screening center. But the answer was that they only needed medical staff! However, they replied that some snacks would be helpful. So, we immediately expressed our gratitude and support in handwritten letters, bought some pastries and visited the screening center near our office.

Of course, we had to be careful when we went to see the front liners. We also had to protect ourselves from infectious diseases since we belong to a community that needs to be protected as well. But when we



went to a COVID-19 screening center, we found out that it was not too difficult to approach one of the medical staff in protective clothing. Since we had already written a message in the letter, we only had to say these two sentences: "We brought you some snacks. It's not that much, but ... we would like to express our gratitude." We handed them the snacks and came back.

One day, we were so sad to see a young medical staff member sitting down, so tired. When we approached her and said, "We brought some snacks for you," her face soon brightened up. We cannot forget the image of her sitting there, exhausted.

We shared this experience with the members of our association, the Association of Major Religious Superiors of Religious Women in Korea, to let them know that expressing our gratitude and support is possible in many ways besides prayers. We shared our experience because we knew that many sisters wanted to help those on the front line, but are not sure about what they can do to help.

From the next day, the sisters of our association sent photos and stories documenting that they had delivered snacks with their sincere handwritten letters to front liners and medical staff near their communities. Some of them brought homemade scones or cupcakes, some of them made sandwiches or gimbab, and others brought rice cakes or pastries.

Later, the front liners at clinics and hospitals who received snacks and letters called the convents and thanked them, saying, "Thank you so much" and "I cried after reading the letter." A medical staffer told us that they posted our handwritten letters on the walls of their clinic.

Some congregations held separate fundraisers to support front liners. Other sisters provided cooked dishes to marginalized neighborhoods nearby, after hearing that the community social welfare facilities in their region were not able to do many things they have done with volunteers because they were trying to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In addition, many congregations have been making face masks to give to those who cannot buy masks for various reasons. These are small but heartfelt activities of sisters who only can do so much but want to share even a small amount of their love.

Now, about a month since the practice of social distancing was intensified and public Masses were called off, things have taken an unexpected new turn. COVID-19 is now affecting people all over the world. Once again, we realize that all we can do is to pray whenever we hear about the elderly who are dying alone in Spain, about the medical staff who died from overworking or getting infected while taking care of patients in China, about the priests in Italy who died without a proper funeral Mass, even though they officiated at liturgies and administered sacraments throughout their whole lives.

However, our prayers now have become a new and very special experience. Last Sunday, on March 22, all Korean sisters joined all the UISG members in the prayers of solidarity with the world. (This column was sent to GSR at the end of March even before Pope Francis' blessing *urbi et orbi*.) Prayer for the entire world meant so much to us because we have already experienced the pain and fear and are still experiencing it. When we prayed the Our Father with our Holy Father last Friday (March 20) in solidarity with all Christians around the world, we felt that this COVID-19 crisis, paradoxically, made us truly united spiritually.

No one knows when this outbreak will calm down. However, we are sure that this crisis will teach us that we are still very interconnected and we are all a family of God. We would like to greet all the sisters all over the world. Even in this confusion, we believe that our Lord is preparing for the spring of resurrection for all of us.

We pray:

God, our merciful Father, make all of us who are trying to get through the difficult times realize the importance of life, of the dignity of our neighbors, of the value of love and solidarity. Give us the grace to be reborn as a community that shares hope with consideration and care.

*[Benedictine Sr. Sujin Michael is a member of the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters of Busan, South Korea. She studied theology at the Loyola School of Theology in Manila, Philippines, and is presently serving as the executive secretary of the Association of Major Superiors of Religious Women in Korea.]*

# Pandemic time becomes another novitiate time

BY GABRIELLE BIBEAU | APRIL 17, 2020



(Unsplash / Joshua Sortino)

In the middle of March, I, like many others, was stunned by the swift unfolding of the coronavirus pandemic. I will never forget the day I first understood the seriousness of the crisis. It was March 10, and I was supposed to travel to New York City with one of my sisters. Several hours before we were to board a plane to La Guardia, we decided not to go as we began seeing the number of cases growing in the New York area. This was the first of many workshops, meetings and travel plans that were canceled.

In the week that followed this decision, everything changed. Once I started working from home, my world became very small. Now the only people I see on a daily basis are my sisters in community. Weekends and evenings are freer than they have been in years. I haven't traveled more than 2 miles away from my house in weeks. I can't remember the last time I drove a car.

As I have begun to reflect on how small my world

has become and how free my days have been, I've realized: This is another novitiate time.

For those of you who don't know what novitiate is, it is one of the beginning stages of formation for becoming a religious brother or sister. In the novitiate, you trade a full-time ministry for full-time prayer and study. The amount of time you spend outside the novitiate is restricted as well, and the number of days is actually legislated by canon law.

In fact, if a novice spends too many days away from the novitiate, he or she has to repeat it. To say the least, the novitiate is an intense time of spiritual and personal formation. It is challenging but wholly necessary in the process of becoming a religious.

When I was a novice, a Marianist brother (and major "Star Wars" fan) compared the novitiate to a scene in "The Empire Strikes Back." Luke Skywalker stumbles upon a cave while he is in the forest training to be a Jedi.

"What's in there?" he asks Yoda, the Jedi master training him. "Only what you take with you," Yoda responds.

When Luke enters the darkness of the cave, he goes alone. And in that empty cave, he is confronted by the things that haunt him: his past, his relationship with Darth Vader, and his own propensity to be drawn toward the Dark Side.

Not to make too much of a point, but this brother was right: The novitiate is kind of like that cave. All the "extra" stuff in your life is stripped away. Without all the busyness and activity of ministry, you have no choice but to face your own fears, anxieties, darkness and woundedness. And although a novice does live with others in a religious community, the novitiate year is still an experience of standing alone before God and being confronted with one's identity and purpose.

Right now, many people in our society — religious and lay — are being asked to enter into this novitiate time. Without having our days filled with bustle and activity, we are being confronted with the same question posed by the novitiate: Who am I apart from what I do?

Grappling with this question can be painful, especially for those of us in the United States where being overworked is a virtue and busy-ness is a point of pride. This is no less true for those of us in apostolic religious life.

Just like in the novitiate, there are many temptations to avoid taking advantage of the extra time and space to ask these difficult questions. It is tempting to fill this time with other distractions. For example, few things in my world are more enjoyable and relaxing than hanging out and watching Netflix. And it is so easy to waste time going down a YouTube rabbit hole or scrolling through social media.

But when this pandemic and time of social distancing is over, I would like to be able to say that I didn't squander this time. I'd like to say that I used it as an opportunity to revisit my novitiate experience, to reconnect with God in prayer, to face my own feelings of anxiety, helplessness, frustration and worry at the massive number of people dying of COVID-19, especially those in the most marginalized groups in our nation.

So let's not waste this novitiate time. Let us enter the emptiness of the cave and emerge with a renewed sense of hope in the goodness of God and God's people.

*[Sr. Gabrielle Bibeau professed first vows in the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (Marianist Sisters) in May 2017. She is currently a research and program assistant at the North American Center for Marianist Studies in Dayton, Ohio.]*

Read online at [GlobalSistersReport.org/node/189250](https://GlobalSistersReport.org/node/189250).

# Being known by God

BY VIRGINIA HERBERS | MAY 1, 2020



(Pixabay / Myriam Zilles)

"Why are you crying?" I asked my 3-year-old niece. "I'm not crying," she replied through frustrated sobs. "I am trying to make you understand because you do not understand me."

What I was too dense to "understand" was that when she told me she wanted a red popsicle, what she meant was that she wanted grape. She was still learning her colors, and although she was crystal-clear about what was in her own mind and will, it didn't translate well into what I was "understanding" and how I was able to respond to her expressions of need and desire.

Logic played no role in the ensuing conversation, nor did mercy. Even when she had the grape popsicle firmly in hand, the tears did not subside. Indeed, they could not, because their source was not popsicle flavors; their source was my lack of "understanding."

So it is with God and us sometimes. I know exactly what it is that I want, and I try my best to communicate to him precisely the intention, sentiment, or need. When God "hands me back" something other than what corresponds to what I had expressed, I feel like crying and

saying, "Why do you not understand me?!" Why does God insist on giving me what I need instead of what I ask for?

COVID-19 is teaching us a whole lot of things about need, about fear and hope, about certainty and uncertainty, about ourselves, and about our relationship with God. One of the more surprising lessons I'm learning about myself and about God is that there are different kinds of tears that spring up as we journey through these days together. I suppose I knew this already, but it feels like a new understanding born out of this utterly unique context. Here is what I've been noticing:

Tears come from pain. Watching the news, listening to friends and family experiencing loss, knowing about the rising numbers in unemployment, witnessing the growing hunger and desperation of so many, I find tears often welling up and brimming over. There is so much suffering, so much loss, so much pain right now all around us and within. We are hurting and so we weep.

Tears come from fear. The uncertainty of how much longer we must shelter in place, the scary reality of fi-

nancial or work insecurity, the dread that “getting back to normal” might never happen — all of this can paralyze us and leave us weeping silently in the dark, needing desperately to have an outlet for the fear, and yet equally desperate to spare our loved ones from more anxiety by exposing our own gnawing fright. We are afraid and so we weep.

Tears come from anger. When human realities seem to be eclipsed by politics or greed, when the food so desperately needed by some is rotting in the fields of others, when images appear of medical professionals pleading for help and much-needed supplies, I feel red-hot tears of anger crying out for compassion, justice and a collective commitment to the common good. We are angry and so we weep.

Tears come from joy. An unexpected bouquet is dropped off at the front door. A phone call comes from a childhood friend with whom I have not had a decent conversation in decades. A YouTube video of virtual choirs or a lighthearted exchange about homeschooling woes comes across my screen. The colors of spring and the beauty of the sky remind me of the unrelenting nature of life and renewal. Tears come swiftly with a smile and a deep sigh of gratitude. We are joyful and so we weep.

Tears come from relief. Finding out a loved one who has been hospitalized is coming home, hearing that the son-in-law who was furloughed still has health benefits, seeing the curve flatten — these things relieve our pent-up worry and well-justified anxieties, and the unburdening often releases a stream of tears. We are relieved and so we weep.

Tears come from beauty. I look at the delicate pink dogwood framed against a deep blue sky, I listen to Pope Francis’ words in an empty St. Peter’s Square, I

listen to Yo-Yo Ma play Mozart in his series “Songs of Comfort.” The sheer beauty of life and love overwhelms me and serves as a powerful antidote to the daily weight of uncertainty and difficulty, and as I allow the beauty to wash over me, the tears come. We experience grandeur and beauty and so we weep.

Tears can come from nowhere. Then, for no apparent reason, with no apparent catalyst, I find myself standing over the dishwasher or digging through the garden or scrolling through Facebook posts, and the tears just stream. They come without drama or even affect, they come without thought or consciousness. But they come. We experience our humanity and the realities of life and it makes us weep sometimes.

The source of our tears varies, but their destination remains the same. Our tears bring us to the embrace of God. God it is who holds us, cradling us in our fears; God it is who receives our tears as fragile offerings of trust and hope; God it is who stays right here with us, even when we are still snuffling over our popsicles. “It wasn’t about the popsicle itself,” we seem to say. “It was about making sure you still know me.”

And the response? “I have loved you with an everlasting love; you are mine. I will never leave you” (Jeremiah 31:3; Isaiah 49:15).

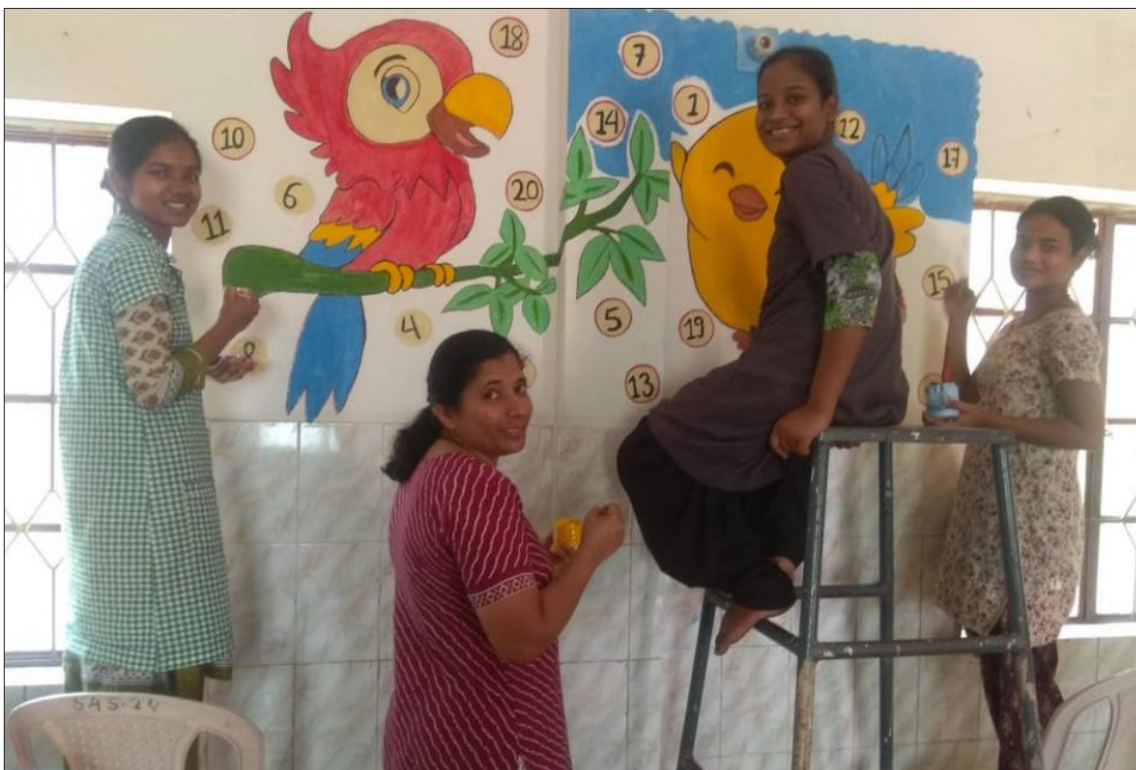
As the river is promised to the sea, so are we promised to our God.

*[Virginia Herbers is an Apostle of the Sacred Heart of Jesus who is director of spiritual formation at St. Louis University. She has a master’s degree in pastoral studies and has ministered in education at both the elementary and high school levels in Connecticut, New York, Missouri and Taiwan.]*

Read online at [GlobalSistersReport.org/node/189551](https://GlobalSistersReport.org/node/189551).

# The power of painting in a time of COVID

BY SHINI MELUKUNNEL | AUG. 4, 2020



Sr. Shini Melukunnel, second from left, paints with her three student helpers who are preparing to become nuns. "It is not how much we have, but how much we enjoy, that makes happiness." (Provided photo)

We are amid a worldwide pandemic caused by the spread of a novel coronavirus. The fear and anxiety about the virulent spread of the COVID-19 disease have been a matter of great concern for all — indeed, an extremely shattering phenomenon.

Our lives will simply have to keep changing for a while and we may need to rebuild our lives around this new normalcy. Nevertheless, the reactions and responses may vary from person to person, place to place, and time to time. And this pandemic can teach us how to deal with other difficult situations in the future.

It is important to remember that whatever you or I may be feeling right now, it is genuine.

When we hear the word "lockdown," we may feel completely lost. There is no hope to go ahead; we are blocked from doing what can be done effectively for

ourselves and others.

For instance, when I felt stuck because of the prolonged lockdown imposed by the government, I realized that I did not have much to do. I found delight in painting, which kept me stress-free. Releasing anxiety in the form of painting helped me to unwind and let go of all the pressures that plagued my mind during these trying times.

Currently, most of my time is spent preparing notes to post online for my students, since a physical meeting in a classroom is no longer feasible. So, I keep on painting the nursery classroom and making it more attractive.

The purpose was not merely to indulge my fascination with painting, but I thought the painting would

contribute to the process of learning and teaching for young children.

Three 18 year-old students who are preparing to become nuns helped me to accomplish this joyful task. That brought much happiness, enjoyment and a feeling of teamwork to all of us. We were happy at the thought of bringing joy to others, and sharing our positive mindset with those who came to see our painting as well as to the children. It delighted us to spend our time painting, hoping to promote a happy mood for ourselves and those around us.

Meanwhile, I was happy to realize that every picture that we have painted on the classroom walls will have a great impact on the children. Pictures are great teachers, and touch every child in a very simple way. No matter how many teachers there are in the room, this silent teacher will always be welcome, appreciated and highly influential.

Painting pictures that children will be interested in made me realize that they can extend the exploration of certain concepts and the child's sense of wonder. A painting is a powerful instrument that gives spirit and life to many, especially by transmitting knowledge and serving as a venue for further exploration of new things.

Paintings are all about colors. Colors can motivate people to turn thinking into doing. We use colors for many reasons: to decorate, to communicate, to enhance creativity, to foster independent thinking, and for the physical and emotional wellbeing of a person.

I also learned that the process of painting teaches patience. It helps us to learn to share, to interact with others, to be responsible — and gives us a broader area for innovation and creativity. It connects us to our senses, body and mind. It gives wings of expression to our imagination, illustrated by many painters and artists of old, such as Michelangelo, Vincent Willem van Gogh, and Leonardo da Vinci.

When something beautiful is made through painting, it stimulates the artistic mind and encourages an optimistic approach to life. It can help us feel the world. And this feeling may spring into thinking, engagement and even action. That is what happened in my case.

I don't see painting as an agent of change. I see it as a companion of change.

The coronavirus lockdown has restricted all of us inside our homes. But it has given us a good opportunity to develop our hidden talents and spend time with God, ourselves, and with those who are with us.



Student helpers at work painting the nursery school (Provided photo)

We are not alone in this pandemic situation. So, let us face it together as one human community with a great sense of solidarity, service and hope that we shall overcome it one day.

Moreover, we love each other from afar, pray for those who are sick and on the frontlines. We continue to do our parts for each other.

And above all, let us make use of and enjoy our hidden talents and gifts, to enhance these times with greater interest, attention and passion. I did it by painting the classrooms of my school. I hope you will find your own, in spite of the many constraints you may have.

*[Shini Melukunnel, an Indian national from Kottayam, Kerala, Southern India, is a member of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit. Besides her academic background in education and post graduate work in guidance and counseling, she took a formator's course in Chile. Currently, she is the secretary to the provincial superior in her home province, and a teacher at St Arnold's Convent School in Jharsuguda, a town in the eastern Indian state of Odisha.]*

# Let us be bearers of hope in the midst of pain and suffering

BY SCHOLASTICAH NGANDA | SEPT. 22, 2020



Some women earn a living by managing this food kiosk, which provides tea, maize and beans to passing businessmen on motorcycles in Juba, South Sudan. (Provided photo)

As the world grapples with responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, with its devastating consequences for individuals and communities, a major question occupies my mind: What critical opportunity does this story of tragic suffering and loss present for theological reflection?

This story is painful. I have been reflecting on it contemplatively, and with the mind of Jesus, trying to see God's presence in this crisis.

Our world is basically being shut down — it's a place we don't recognize anymore. Marketplaces are empty, shopping malls are running out of stock, and our churches are empty — in fact, closed. It feels like the end of the world.

I would like to know the plans God has for us in this pandemic. And with the government restrictions and rules! As critical as social distancing is to help stop the

spread of the virus, I am struggling with this practice. But what if all this is to draw me into an intimate relationship with God?

Scripture reveals that God's best work is often done in people who have distanced themselves from society for a period of time. Think of the Prophet Elijah finding deep intimacy in a still small voice in his cave of loneliness (1 Kings 19:11-13). Think of Jesus finding intimate fellowship with the Father during his 40 days' wilderness fasting (Mark 1:12-13). Could God be taking us away from all forms of distractions in order to bring us to a place of seclusion to hear God's voice once more? God's Presence is often hidden, a Presence that needs to be discovered.

Coming from an African culture where we value hugging and hand-shaking, I have found the advice not to shake hands quite unsettling. On reflecting on the



hand-shaking practice, now more than ever before I believe that personal touch points to the Incarnation. God did not save us with a decree from heaven. God's only Son came to dwell among us. It was about embodiment. It was about touch. Jesus touched lepers and they were healed and became whole.

As members of Christ's body, reaching our hands out to those in need, we become aware of the healing we bring. Reflect on how we touch others — even the gestures we use — especially with the most vulnerable in our society. How do we reach out and touch the other within the limits of COVID-19 restrictions?

This time of social distancing reminds us of the centrality and importance of personal touch in the community, a place where all are uniquely valued. Referring to the pandemic, on Divine Mercy Sunday Pope Francis said that this is "an opportunity to prepare for our collective future, a future for all without discarding anyone."

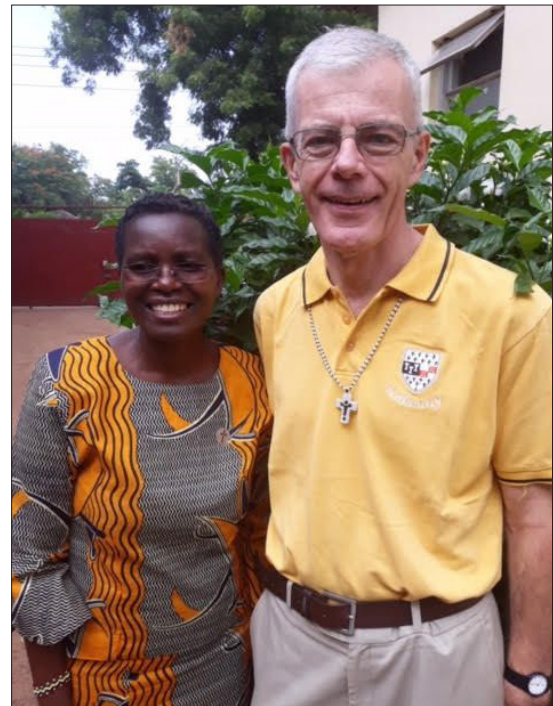
Forbidden Mass attendance has made it clear how vital faith is to our lives. Many people are now starving to be fed with the word of God and the Body of Christ. Though participating in Mass via internet or some form of social media is spiritually supportive in these days of anxiety, nothing can replace the healing balm of the Eucharist and the sacraments.

The new reality of doing without Sunday Mass is strange and disheartening. Reflecting on the closed church doors and canceled Masses, what has given me hope is the fact that it is impossible to close church as the people of God. My faith goes beyond the walls of the church building, allowing me to build strength to support serenity, healthy relationships, and a better ability to bounce back when COVID-19 presses down hard.

We are the church — whether dispersed in the world, inside our homes or watching our services on livestream. My faith community brings me a sense of peace, even when we cannot worship together. Though our parish parking lot may be empty for months, we are still the living embodiment of the Gospel wherever we go.

As COVID-19 disease smashes the long-revered idol of wellness, the virus teaches the important lesson that no one is exempt from the possibility of infection. We are all equal, precious and fragile. This pandemic is forcing all of us to look straight into the eyes of our own fragility. Our bodies are not bionic. Even with an optimal regimen of diet, exercise and sleep, they eventually break down and we die.

Since being missioned to Solidarity with South Sudan, I am now more conscious of my own mortality than when I lived in Kenya or in Ireland. South Sudan is



Congregation of Mercy Sr. Scholasticah Nganda with Missionaries of Africa Fr. Jim Greene, executive director of Solidarity with South Sudan (Provided photo)

a fragile country struggling to emerge from decades of civil war; thousands of families live below poverty level with no hope of ventilators for COVID-19 patients. We all live within divinely imposed limits, even as we long for God to make all things well in the resurrection.

The spreading virus plunges us into a global health crisis; we are only at the early stages in some parts of the world. No doubt this pandemic is going to reshape economy, society and politics permanently. Its effects — rippling through all known systems — have a noticeable impact on global economic growth. Doesn't this remind us anew of the fragility of world systems? Yet, sometimes we live as if our life entirely depended on these systems.

As we live through this let us draw inspiration from Paul: "For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present times" (Romans 8:22). Is this pandemic the pains of childbirth and groaning that Paul describes? Ask any mother and she will admit that the pains of childbirth eventually succumb to the birth of new life, a glorious moment. By his cross and resurrection, Jesus will eventually restore our broken world for we believe God makes all things new (Revelation 21:5).

In these days of doubt and questioning, negative news is utterly pervasive — exposing us consciously

and unconsciously to much more of the downside of the pandemic than any appreciable upside. We may not easily understand or accept God's presence in the COVID-19 disease, but let's trust that God will care for us and enable us to find spiritual calm when all else is in turmoil.

This pandemic presents our community of faith with an opportunity to witness how the Spirit works, no matter what else is falling apart around us. This is immensely comforting, a tremendous antidote to panic! Our faith invites us to respond to this pandemic in creative and unique ways, born of love, compassion and self-giving.

Let us choose to expand our compassion and be bearers of hope in the midst of pain and suffering. Only this way will we change this story of pain and suffering to be one of compassion and communion.

Be safe!


*[Scholasticah Nganda is Kenyan by birth and a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy. She is now serving as the director of pastoral programs for Solidarity with South Sudan, Juba, and is one of four members of the Solidarity Pastoral Team working in collaboration with the Catholic Bishops Conference of South Sudan to meet the pastoral needs of the church there.]*


**Editor's note:** *The author wishes to credit Missionaries of Africa Fr. Jim Greene for helping her with this column. Greene is the executive director of Solidarity with South Sudan, and worked in Malawi, Ireland, Italy and Israel before coming to Juba, South Sudan. He was also in the leadership of his congregation in Rome.*


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