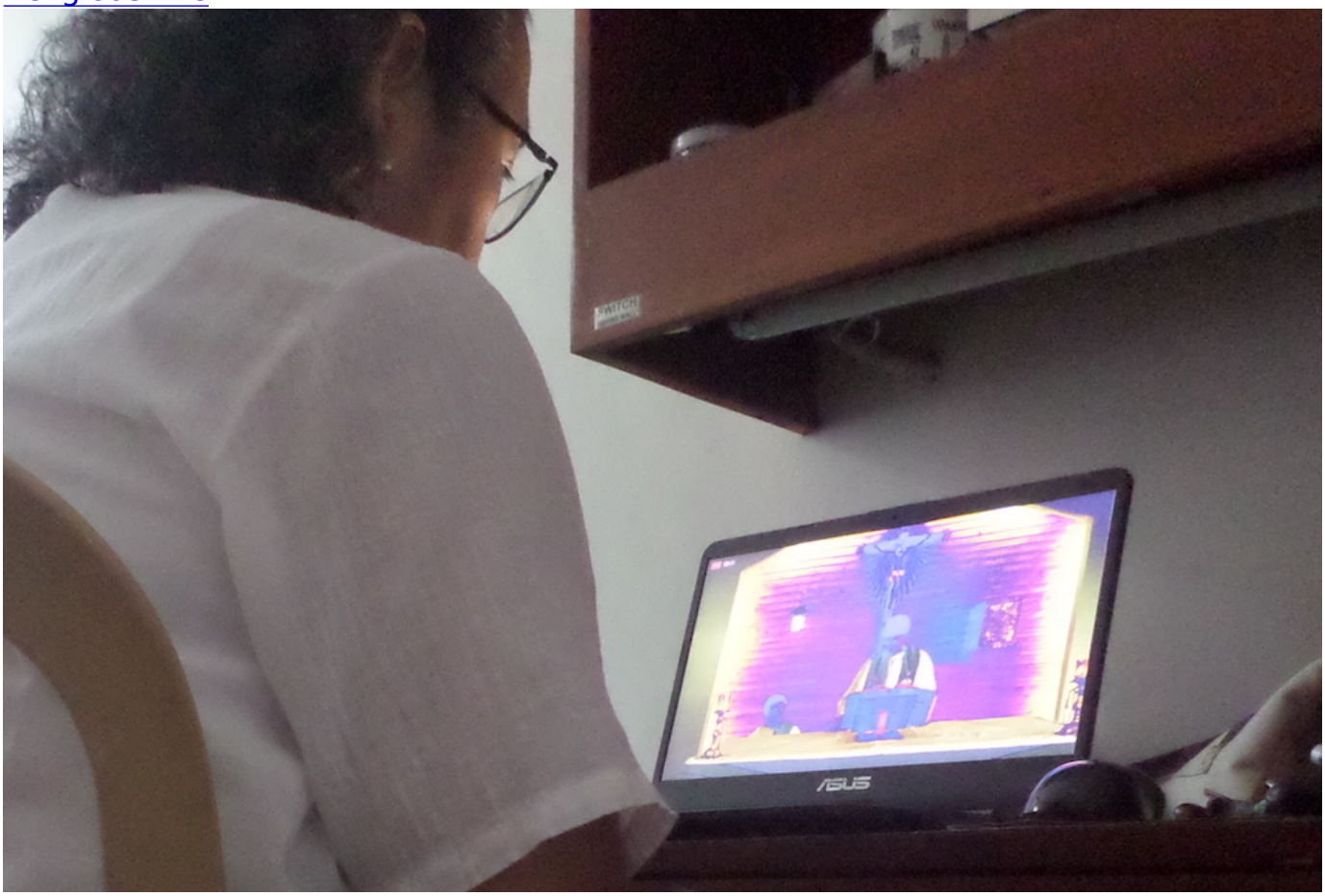
News
News
Coronavirus
Ministry
Religious Life



With public gatherings canceled in the Philippines, individual sisters and small groups of the Religious of the Good Shepherd attend Mass online. (Provided photo)

by GSR Staff

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The COVID-19 pandemic upended sisters' ministries, requiring strict policies to protect the most vulnerable, forcing cancellations of congregational and regional gatherings, and changing prayer practices, fellowship, dining and funeral services. Weeks into the crisis, the coronavirus poses another challenge: How do sisters keep a sense of community in a time of social distancing, stay-at-home orders and quarantines?

Congregations around the world shared with Global Sisters Report how they are trying to achieve that. Leadership and communications teams are in overdrive to keep sisters informed, remind them of safeguards and offer special prayers and resources. Because people over the age of 65 are at a higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19, adhering to the protocols is paramount in the United States, where 80% of women religious are over the age of 70, and elsewhere around the world. Among younger — and often poorer — congregations in Asia and Africa, there is already concern that shuttered ministries and lost jobs will make food meager for members as well as those they minister to.

Many congregations and sister organizations are relying on technology such as video conferencing and livestreaming events, often used for years but ramped up in the past few weeks. Some are equipping elderly sisters with iPads. Others strive to maintain the structure of their prayer life, though remaining at least 6 feet apart and "spiritual Communion" are the new realities, as eucharistic celebrations are on hiatus. Letter-writing and call campaigns are underway to sisters isolated in nursing homes or living alone or in small groups far from the motherhouse.

Some congregations are channeling sisters' innate need to help during a crisis by making hand sanitizer or sewing masks for medical personnel — with appropriate protective measures in place. Gestures of appreciation are being made to nursing home, infirmary and facility staff. Outlets for creative energy have fostered singalongs and newly created funny and poignant videos. Virtual birthday celebrations are being held. Some funeral services are livestreamed with attendance sharply curtailed but with call-in opportunities to share memories of the deceased;

other communities are postponing memorial services for a future date.

Many sisters and congregations are drawing on the stories of the challenges their foundresses and early members overcame — often in previous pandemics — to bolster their own courage during the current crisis.

"The experience of women religious facing adversity and challenges throughout our history is a model and a witness for our church and the world," said Sr. Susan Francois, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace leadership team in the United States.

Below is a sampling of how some congregations are coping with COVID-19 and maintaining community in these times. We will publish more examples next week. Want to share about your congregation or community? Click here to submit an example that we may use in future coverage. You can find all of GSR's coverage of the coronavirus here.

Advertisement

Kenya

Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi

With the Kenyan government shutting borders, suspending air travel and asking that everyone work from home except essential employees for governments, businesses and organizations, the Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi in Nairobi, like other religious congregations, are taking measures to comply, said Sr. Pasilisa Namikoye, a congregation member who is also executive secretary of the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK).

The association's offices are closed indefinitely, she said.

"So far, we have not had any cases among different congregations in Kenya," she said. "As AOSK, we keep calling different members and congregations and also send emails and WhatsApp messages to encourage each other. We also send prayers through these mediums. In situations like this one, we always remain united in prayers."

The congregation has sisters in Kenya and across East Africa. Congregations in Kenya have been forced to stop some of their ministries, which include helping street children and assisting people with disabilities.

"We are trying to protect everyone by maintaining social distancing," she said. "We have been forced to stop some of the operations as we adhere to the government directives."

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One congregation program to feed vulnerable women and children is still operating despite a sharp downturn in donations. The local church and volunteers run the program.

"We leave what has been donated by sisters and well-wishers at the church and send messages to the women via phone and have them come one by one to pick what we have gathered," Namikoye said. "So far, this has worked, but we are uncertain how long it is going to last."

The sisters' spiritual life needs to stay intact, said Namikoye, who lives in a house with three other sisters and a housekeeper. They moved the chapel to the living room to keep social distance. While the sisters now occasionally eat together, they are having more individual meals and prayers for safety.

"We also thank God to have been born in this era where there are mobile phones and technology," she said. "At least we are able to communicate with each other on the phone and also find out how other congregations are doing."

"We are praying and encouraging each other in this hard time, hoping that it will not be too long, though it has drastically affected our social life and our evangelization."

The Philippines

Franciscan Missionaries of Mary

When the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines made a call on the fourth week of March to its member congregations of women and men for ways the church can help during the unfolding crisis, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in Manila offered an empty convent close to Philippine General Hospital, a government hospital, for use by front-line health workers for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis, said Sr. Marilyn Oliva, the community's provincial superior.

There are about 140 sisters in the congregation's Philippine province, excluding sisters from other countries who are there studying. Sr. Gloria Carmen Eamiguel, a member of the provincial council, is in charge of running the St. Clare convent for the front-line workers and coordinating with the hospital and the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines. Seven health care workers are using the convent as temporary housing. Lay staff members of the congregation cook for the workers, and the hospital also provides food. A shuttle takes them to and from the hospital.

As for the community itself, "we are now like contemplatives," said Sr. Leonila Villanueva, who belongs to another Franciscan Missionaries of Mary community, the St. Pius X community in Quezon City. Senior citizens are prohibited from leaving their residences, so the younger sisters or lay staff go out and do errands, she added.

"Our sisters in Tagaytay City had not yet recovered from the Taal volcano eruption when another volcano of unparalleled magnitude erupted: COVID-19," said Sr. Asuncion Borromeo, also from the St. Pius X community.

In Bagong Silang in Caloocan City in metropolitan Manila, the sisters are helping about 500 pedicab drivers who are out of work by giving them rice and other food. Bagong Silang is said to be the most populated *barangay* (local government unit) in the Philippines.

"Like in other poor areas, our people there are in survival and starving mode," Borromeo said. "As of now, not a shadow of help has come from the government."



The Religious of the Good Shepherd's Philippines-Japan province conducted its chapter meeting — held every six years — in March while observing social distancing. (Provided photo)

Religious of the Good Shepherd, Province of Philippines-Japan

The Religious of the Good Shepherd in Quezon City was holding its first chapter meeting March 18-27 for the newly merged province of Philippines-Japan as COVID-19 restrictions were imposed globally. Provincial chapter meetings, held once every six years, provide time for prayer and planning for the next six years, including election of new leadership. With travel restrictions already imposed on Italy, congregational leadership from Italy could not attend, and sisters from other regions in the Philippines and Japan also couldn't come. The delegates who could attend elected new leaders.

"All throughout our gathering from the chapel, to the session halls, we observed social and physical distancing," Sr. Regina Kuizon, the outgoing province leader whose term ends in June, told GSR in an email. "Our Eucharistic celebrations were limited and the singing of Mass service songs were avoided."

Communion service and common prayers are now in small groups, she wrote. The sisters gather for holy hour or adoration in small groups or alternate in the bigger

chapel for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

"Our prayers go for the frontliners and those who perished, those who are grieving the loss of their loved ones," she wrote. "And we continue to pray that women and children wherever they are, even in their own homes, are safe and have not experienced any form of abuse during this time of COVID-19 and lockdown."

South Africa

The Companions of St. Angela

As a lockdown commences in South Africa for at least three weeks, the Companions of St. Angela in Johannesburg are trying to live a normal life as much as possible. Community is vital to religious life, and they are seeking to live it despite the challenges.

"We are aware that community life exposes us to greater risk during this time; however, community life is the essence of religious life, so we try to keep things as normal as possible by participating in communal activities like meals and prayers but with precautionary measures," said Sr. Nkhensani Shibambu, the superior general of the congregation of 60 sisters who range in age from 28 to 65.

Cleanliness is a key way of ensuring that COVID-19 is kept at bay, she said. As a community, they have put extra measures in place, thoroughly washing hands with soap and water or using hand sanitizer and practicing social distancing.

"Hygiene is an important aspect," she said. "Those who fall sick at our house are always encouraged to isolate or eat separately as a way of protecting other members."

Shibambu, who is also an executive member of the Leadership Conference of Consecrated Life in South Africa, is reaching out to other congregations.

"We encourage use of phone as a way of communication and means of conducting prayer," she said. "We use emails and WhatsApp messages to reach out to each other and other sisters in different congregations and also to encourage each other."

Related: WhatsApp forums, social distancing: Nigerian sisters respond to the coronavirus pandemic

United States

Adrian Dominican Sisters

Four sisters from the congregation have died, none from COVID-19, since March 12, the day before the Adrian Dominican Sisters in Michigan put strict protocols in place as cases in the state increased, dioceses began canceling Masses and government officials began ratcheting up restrictions on public gatherings.

The new protocols meant funeral services had to be adjusted, said Sr. Pat Siemen, the community's prioress. With no communal gatherings allowed for any reason, only leadership team members and two sisters who were particularly close to the sister who died were allowed to attend, and only if they met health checks of no fever, cough or other symptoms.

The funerals were livestreamed, a practice long in place, so family members and sisters could attend virtually. But instead of the usual informal gathering after Mass to share memories of the sister, a phone-in service was created so people could call and hear each other's memories of her.

As restrictions ramped up in March, communication with the 531 sisters spread across 22 states, particularly the 236 at the main campus, which includes 141 in a skilled nursing facility, was critical, Siemen said.

"Each day is a new challenge because there is more information about the spread of COVID-19," she said. "It becomes more real that our normal way of life is no more."

The leadership team held two special livestreamed meetings to explain protocols and share prayer resources to those on campus, regional superiors across the country and its Philippines chapter.



To prevent the possible spread of infection, communal dining has been suspended at the Adrian Dominican motherhouse in Adrian, Michigan. Sisters are being served meals in their rooms. (Provided photo)

The members of the council provide a livestreamed update on how the sisters are each Monday and starting April 3 will host a "fireside chat" every Friday afternoon to take calls from sisters.

One 83-year-old sister in the Detroit area was hospitalized with COVID-19 on March 19 and returned home March 30. There are no other known cases among congregation members.

The motherhouse chaplain who lives on campus celebrates Mass Sunday through Friday. Only leadership members can attend, and spiritual Communion — without distribution of the Eucharist — is held with other members. Communion is distributed Sundays by leadership team members to the sisters in their rooms.

For sisters on campus, no communal dining is allowed, and meals are delivered to their rooms. Sisters on each floor can meet as long as they keep the rules for social distancing: no card-playing or jigsaw puzzles as a group.

Efforts are being made to keep spirits up. Movies are being streamed. Staff on each floor of the skilled nursing center take turns each day choosing a fun and light song to sing at 2 p.m., which is piped through the campus.

"Sisters who live off-campus are encouraged to write a letter or call sisters who are confined to their communities on campus," Siemen said. "We just keep looking at ways of being community in new ways, to be supportive and have some fun together."

Sisters are coping, she said. In addition to prayer, they write letters on issues to local, state and national representatives and political leaders, clean out closets and work on autobiographies.

"In many ways, we find ourselves returning to a cloistered life this Lent, praying for the world's leaders, health care providers and the healing of the global community," she said.

Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Smaller communities with space to spread out have been able to maintain some semblance of their schedule. The 20 sisters of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Hamden, Connecticut, are keeping their prayer schedule while practicing social distancing by gathering in different chapels, said Sr. Angela Gertsema, formation director. Each sister brings her own towel to prevent the spread of germs when washing and drying hands, and hand sanitizer is available.

At a Mass early in the pandemic, a priest consecrated a lot of hosts, she said, so daily Communion service continues in three different chapels.

"Everyone is being very creative about it," she said.

TV trays have been set up in the provincial house's dining area to maintain distance from each other. Older sisters are self-isolating on a case-by-case basis, especially if they serve in a ministry where they are considered essential and do not want to put their sisters at risk. Formation classes are continuing, and those in formation are contacting their families more than usual.

"We spend a lot of time keeping things as calm as we can," she said. "We've continued formation class daily, and the prayer is very intentional. We take turns

planning something."

At least 10 of the communities in the congregation's province serve in schools, which are on virtual mode — using online methods to meet with students, teach lessons and grade assignments — and an adult day care center the community runs is closed.

The congregation's main campus has three different rooftops where the sisters can see each other. One night, there was a dance party with plenty of social distancing so sisters could have some fun.

To maintain her own spiritual strength, "I keep going back to the Gospel," Gertsema said, drawing on the oft-cited observation that the message to not be afraid appears 365 times in Scripture.

"I keep going back to that," she said. "And I'm praying the Serenity Prayer more often."

Maryknoll Sisters

"We're practicing an abundance of caution," said Sr. Nonie Gutzler, president of the Maryknoll Sisters in Ossining, New York. "We're trying to find a balance between that caution and yet continuing our prayer life, a community life together. It's like a delicate dance."

There are 341 Maryknoll sisters, with about 205 now at the congregation's center in Ossining. Gutzler said the sisters stay in touch through emailed updates.

"Sisters all over the world and those ministering in different parts of the U.S. are sending what is happening in their part of the world, and I am collating and sending it out to everyone," she said. "It is keeping us connected, and I've received many emails of thanks."

The congregation is similarly keeping in touch with its associates and lay missioners through email.

Social distancing measures are in place, at least during the communal meal time. In recent weeks, the number of those allowed at a table at the congregational cafeteria has dropped from six to four to three and now to two, and "we sit at a distance,"

Gutzler said. Sisters plating their own meals, cafeteria-style, has stopped.

With the community closed to visitors and ministries halted, the pace has slowed considerably.

"Normally, it can be frenetic," Gutzler said. Now, she said, "we're having conversations with each other we didn't have when we were busy."

The time together has brought some graces. With such a large community, there have been occasional frayed relationships and misunderstandings between some sisters through the years. Now, "some relationships are healing," Gutzler said. "People are being pulled together. I think in some ways, we're deepening our bonds of sisterhood at this unsettling time."

The congregation's oldest members, who live on different floors than active community members, must now have meals in their rooms, restricting interaction with others. "That is tough," Gutzler said.

The center's activities director, who is now working from home, "prepared 'go-bags' that the nurses' aides can take to the rooms of the sisters and work with them on some of the activities," Gutzler said. These include word games, word searches, brain teasers, coloring pages and crossword puzzles.

Celebration of the Word with Communion service had been held four times a week, including Sundays. "However, one of our sisters has just become ill, so in an abundance of caution, we are suspending our communal prayer in our main chapel so that, as much as possible, we can keep everyone keep our distance and be safe," Gutzler said. "We will work out creative ways to have prayer together."



Sinsinawa Dominican sisters attend Mass virtually while practicing social distancing. (Provided photo)

Sinsinawa Dominicans

Parody has a long tradition with the Sinsinawa Dominicans in Wisconsin, so when the motherhouse went on lockdown, a group of the younger sisters living elsewhere knew exactly what to do to boost morale and stay connected.

To the tune of the Lenten hymn "Lord, Who Throughout These 40 Days," they created verses to remind listeners of the importance of social distancing, hand-washing and other guidelines, using a Google Doc to share and edit the verses. They filmed themselves taking the actions, and a congregation staff member tracked down the creator of the music they wanted to use to avoid copyright issues. In a little over a week, "Lord, Who Throughout This Quarantine" was finished, said Sr. Nicole Reich, who oversaw and edited the video.

Video on YouTube, "Lord, Who throughout this Quarantine" song by the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters

"It was something we wanted to do to boost morale at the motherhouse," she said, but the sisters sent it to the entire congregation, as everyone is supposed to be taking the actions. It was important to get it done quickly, she said, before the crisis took a larger emotional and psychological toll as it affected more people.

The motherhouse of 130 sisters at the Sinsinawa Mound, including 60 at St. Dominic Villa, the skilled nursing facility across the street from the motherhouse, is in lockdown. Services are being broadcast, and sisters can eat with each other only in small groups, said Tricia Buxton, communications director.

Reich, a hospice chaplain, said she is restricted from seeing many of her patients in hospitals, though she is still able to make home visits. "It helps that I'm still working and able to focus on other people. The video was helpful to have a fun creative outlet to distract me from the news."

Related: Confined French sisters seek ways to remain close to the vulnerable



Sr. Paschal Maria Fernicola, one of the Sew Sisters from the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, sews a mask to be donated to health care workers. (Provided photo)

Sisters of Charity of Nazareth

For Sr. Luke Boiarski, the social distancing restrictions have changed the prayers, conversations and even relations between sisters at the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky. Boiarski is director of community's disaster recovery team.

At prayer gatherings, she said, a handful of sisters will come together but maintain a strict 6-foot distance.

"It's really interesting because it makes it very comfortable, very informal, and a very spiritual time," she said. "You actually don't feel the distance because you're united in a very unique way."

At meals, sisters can only sit two to a table that normally seats four or five.

"There's more conversation going on with two to a table," Boiarski said. "You really have to look someone in the eye and really have to listen to them and really have to respond. They're very intimate conversations."

The disaster recovery team was planning to travel to Nashville, Tennessee, to aid in the recovery effort after a March 3 tornado but had to postpone the trip. That, she said, has made it hard to feel connected to the community outside the convent.

Two years ago, sisters, associates and volunteers who wanted to help the disaster recovery team but were unable to travel formed a group called the Sew Sisters to sew clothing for those in need. That group is now churning out medical masks.

"They're up to making 200 in a week," Boiarski said. "The only thing slowing them down is getting the elastic they need for the straps."

The masks have gone to the congregation's nursing homes as well as health care facilities in Kentucky, New York and Japan. Sisters of Charity in India are sewing masks, as well.

"I'm just so glad I have this mask ministry going on because it makes me feel like I'm doing something," she said.



Masks sewn by the Sew Sisters from the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, will be donated to health care workers. The group is making up to 200 masks in a week, which are being used in the congregation's nursing home and being donated to health care facilities in Kentucky, New York and Japan. (Provided photo)



At the dining room at the motherhouse of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan, sisters practice social distancing while still eating meals communally. (Provided photo)

Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary

One way the congregation of 230 sisters maintains community during this time is by fostering a "sisterly connection" between those living at the motherhouse in Monroe, Michigan, and those off-campus through a letter-writing and phone-call campaign in which sisters are paired up with each other, said Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary president Sr. Jane Herb.

"People jumped into this relationship right away," she said. "It's a very concrete way that the community is flourishing."

The motherhouse campus, where 163 sisters and associates live, went into lockdown March 23. There is now only one entrance, and only essential staff is allowed. A receptionist takes everyone's temperatures, and visitors receive a sticker saying they have been screened. Sisters in independent living cannot visit those in the skilled nursing center.

The Liturgy of the Word is being livestreamed, and the sisters are offering reflections on Scripture that are also available on the congregation's website.

"The chapel is very empty, but they know we are connecting with them," she said.

As a congregational leader and member of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious' regional team, Herb has been on numerous video calls to share ideas and resources, she said.

"We're looking at what is going to sustain us for the long haul because that is a concern," she said.



Online meetings have become the norm for congregation leaders such as Sr. Jane Herb of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan. (Provided photo)

The congregation is trying to get iPads for the nursing staff so residents can connect with their families, who are not allowed to visit at this time. Lighter movies and exercise videos are being shown via a closed-circuit channel. The sisters are looking for ways to support and thank staff.

Sisters are still being allowed community dining, spread out among three dining rooms and with no more than three sisters at a table.

As a way to draw strength for the current challenge that "touches our whole global community," Herb addressed the community via a video address referencing the history of the IHMs and the challenges they've faced in the past, including the exile of foundress Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin and building a motherhouse during the Great Depression.

She also recounted how sisters were striving to "be community" to each other. She told the story of one sister taking a walk to stand on the veranda outside the room of a sister she could not visit in the health care facility just to make a connection.

"Remember that we are Easter people. We are people of faith, and the sun will rise on a brand-new day," Herb said in the video.

The challenge as a leader is to be creative on how to reach out "to create community in these difficult times," she said. "Our founders had ultimate trust in God, and that's been a reminder to us as a congregation."

The COVID-19 pandemic, she said, is "uniting us as a global community. We are all in this together."



From left: Sr. Theresa LaMetterey, Sr. Jayne Helmlinger, Sr. Cecilia Magladry and Sr. Sue Dunning, all members of the leadership team for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, California, take part in a singalong in front of a photo backdrop of a 1650s kitchen from Le Puy, France, where the Sisters of St. Joseph were originally founded. While
Owen the cocker spaniel normally visits Regina Residence, the sisters' skilled nursing facility that is currently closed to the rest of the community because of

COVID-19, "he, like the rest of us, is not going into Regina Residence at this time," Helmlinger said. (Provided photo)

Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange

Against a photo replica of the kitchen area of the Sisters of St. Joseph's original convent from the 1650 founding of the community in Le Puy, France, general superior Sr. Jayne Helmlinger and the leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange in California take turns hosting a "FaceTime from the Kitchen" broadcast to the 102-member community for an hour every Monday, Wednesday and Friday since the COVID-19 restrictions began.

"We're trying to do fun things and informative sessions," Helmlinger told GSR.

The leadership team's cellphone numbers are displayed during the broadcast so members can contact them easily with questions. In her dual role as leader of her community and president of LCWR, Helmlinger is keenly aware of the need to communicate with her congregation — the 41 who live at the Regina Residence as well as the 61 who live elsewhere — and the larger sisterhood and is drawing on her long experience in health care.

In addition to COVID-19 updates, broadcast topics include spiritual reflections on upcoming Sunday readings, specific theological themes and, soon, a five-part series on each of the five LCWR emerging orientations.

An online singalong with Helmlinger and other members of the leadership team, also with the kitchen replica as the backdrop, began March 27 and will be held each Friday. Sisters are given song sheets of the songs they perform.

"I've said I want them to raise the roof of Regina with their voices and praise," Helmlinger said.

Helmlinger and her community are looking for ways to help. The congregation's motherhouse, which opens to the grounds of nearby St. Joseph Hospital, was largely cleared in 2015 for conversion to housing for low-income elderly, a project with Mercy Housing that is in process. The 50 rooms available are being offered to the hospital for staff to stay to avoid long commutes or possibly infecting loved ones.

"We wanted to do what we can for health care workers who are under a lot of stress and literally risking their lives," Helmlinger said.

She is channeling sisters' innate desire to help by reminding them that the restrictions are for their safety and the common good. She suggests sisters find ways to thank nurses, caregivers, dietary workers and other staff by writing cards, just saying thank you and remembering them in prayer.

"I keep saying to put that positive, spiritual, loving energy into the world," she said. "We don't have to know who we're helping. It's not about us. It's praying for those we don't know, those who are alone."



Sisters and novices of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Hung Hoa, Vietnam, attend a morning Mass on March 27 at a Yen Bai church. On March 28, restrictions went into place banning public gatherings, and Masses were suspended indefinitely. (GSR photo / Joachim Pham)

Vietnam

Lovers of the Holy Cross

"We feel worried about the deadly pandemic, which destroys our livelihood and ministry, but we do trust in Divine Providence," said Lovers of the Holy Cross of Hung Hoa Sr. Anna Do Thi On, head of the convent in Yen Bai City. "We spend our spare time taking turns to pray and adore the Eucharist."

Since March 30, the nuns have attended daily Mass with a local priest in the convent chapel after the diocese canceled all Masses and liturgical services.

The 40*-member convent has had financial stress after their nursery school, which serves 300 children, closed because of the pandemic. Thirty sisters who are teachers stopped working in January, before the Lunar New Year, said On, who is a teacher. The convent is one of several communities for Lovers of the Holy Cross, which has 400 members in the Vietnam.

"We could not repay the debt of 2 billion dong [about $84,685], which we borrowed to build the school in 2019, in time because we lost our main income," On said.

They have no farmland to grow crops for a living. Half of the nuns also did pastoral work during Lent at parishes. Two nuns served one parish, where they led choirs, taught catechism to couples and converted Catholics and held retreats. They also went into retreats at the motherhouse.

"We try our best to reduce our daily expenses as much as we can so that we can live through the pandemic," she said. They spend 15,000 dong ($0.65) each in food per day, while in the past, each nun spent 30,000 dong per day.

On said if the pandemic continues to last months, the convent will no longer be able to pay for food, and the nuns have to ask for food from their families. Many local people rushed to buy candles and Catholic statues for worship from the convent, so the nuns do make a meager income, she said.

"We feel God's love for us in this difficult time," she said.

To avoid the COVID-19 infection, she said, the sisters wear face masks, wash their hands with disinfectants, keep silent while eating, gargle with salt water, keep social distance, do their own work privately, and limit their work from home. They have healthy herbal drinks, do exercises and keep personal hygiene.

They also cleaned and closed their facilities and only meet outsiders in need who come to buy herbal medicine and Catholic items and ask the nuns to pray for them.

"If only one nun is infected with the coronavirus, the disease will soon spread among us, and then we do not know whether our community exists or not. So we must protect ourselves from the pandemic," On said.



Sr. Anna Do Thi On of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Hung Hoa, Vietnam, left, wears a mask while selling statues and candles to customers at her convent. With schools and parishes closed and sisters unable to work as teachers and administrators, this is the only means of income for the community for now. (GSR photo / Joachim Pham)

**An earlier version of this story gave an incorrect number of members.*

[Doreen Ajiambo, Gail DeGeorge, Ma. Ceres P. Doyo, Chris Herlinger, Joachim Pham, Soli Salgado and Dan Stockman contributed to this report.]

This story appears in the **Pandemic vignettes** feature series. View the full series.