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The administration and nursing staff of St. Joseph Villa, the retirement community of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, encourage people to stay home to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia)

by GSR Staff

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Sisters' communities and congregations worldwide are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by trying to protect their most vulnerable members, maintain a sense of community while practicing safety guidelines, and help others as they can.

Congregations around the world shared with Global Sisters Report how they are reacting to the crisis. Sisters are increasing their time spent in prayer, individually and collectively. Others are making special videos and other efforts to connect with their older sisters in quarantine. Some are hosting online prayer services, discussion groups and community listening sessions. Many are making masks for health care workers. Others are carrying on ministries on a limited basis. Some are opening buildings to house health care workers or the homeless. Sisters in some congregations in Asia and Africa are rationing food for themselves to donate to those in need in surrounding communities.

This is the third sampling of actions congregations have taken. Read the first part and the second part. Want to share about your congregation or community? Click here to submit an example we may use in future coverage. You can find all of GSR's coverage of the coronavirus here.

Ecuador

Franciscans of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Sr. Heydi Gabriela Sayago moved from Venezuela, where the Franciscans of the Sacred Heart of Jesus are based, to Ecuador just a day before Ecuador closed its borders March 16. She was sent to cover the ministries in Guayaquil while a couple of Ecuadorian sisters went to the motherhouse in Caracas, Venezuela, for their perpetual vows.

Sayago, who in Ecuador helps run a retreat center, has been depending on virtual prayer sessions through Instagram as well as a WhatsApp group to stay connected with sisters in Italy, Spain and Colombia, as well as Venezuela and throughout Ecuador. The congregation has almost 80 sisters, most based in Venezuela.

"We're taking this as an opportunity to grow spiritually and to fall in love with the life again," she said. "We're trying to see this as a gift from God, as time we can set aside without needing to ask permission."

Nigeria

School Sisters of Notre Dame

As coronavirus cases in Nigeria keep increasing by the day, three School Sisters of Notre Dame and one candidate preparing to enter the community in Akwa Ibom, a coastal southern part of the country, live as one community: They pray, eat and share their views about the global pandemic and how it has affected every aspect of their lives.

"It's somehow hard for us to be apart, but we ensure not to exchange physical contact with one another," Sr. Lucy Etim said on maintaining social distancing. "The situation is even making us 'burn the more' as a community," she said, using a colloquialism to mean they are losing part of the essence of being community.

> 'We know that the doctors, researchers and scientists are really working very hard, but the situation is increasing around the world, so we are hoping on God to help us at this time.'
>
> —Sr. Lucy Etim
>
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The 16 sisters in the congregation in Nigeria created a WhatsApp group in which they share information about the virus and precautions among themselves and the other School Sisters of Notre Dame congregations in Africa. There are 78 sisters in Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia.

"When anyone wants to come in, we have a bucket with running water where they wash their hands and a sanitizer for them to use, and we do the same thing when we go out and come in," said Etim, who moved to Nigeria in 2015 from the congregation in Kenya.

During their recreational time, the sisters come together to watch news on television and get the latest information, which Etim says helps them make sound decisions about the virus and how to stay safe and inform others.

When the government announced the closure of schools across the country beginning March 26, the Notre Dame Girls' Secondary School the sisters run was shut down and the girls, 277 of them, were asked to go home to their families.

An associate priest from a nearby parish celebrated Mass for the sisters in the community recently. But the bishop of the diocese has issued a directive for the suspension of Masses going forward.

Etim said the global health crisis has "strengthened our faith as a community."

She added: "We know that the doctors, researchers and scientists are really working very hard, but the situation is increasing around the world, so we are hoping on God to help us at this time."

United States

Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration

Kelley Baldwin, director of communications for the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde, Missouri, said while it often feels like the pandemic has changed everything, some things for the almost 50 members in the congregation have changed very little or not at all.

"There's a reason they call it 'convent clean' — our sisters have always been vigilant about keeping public and private spaces spotless," Baldwin wrote in an email. "They've simply upped their game during this pandemic and continue to scrub and scour every surface."

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The monastery has a closed-circuit television system to broadcast from the adoration chapel to the health care facility so sisters in the infirmary can watch daily services. The adoration chapel is large, so all the sisters who live in the main house can still participate in prayer services while maintaining social distancing.

"Prayer is the cornerstone of the Benedictine Sisters, and it is something they rely on at all times — good and bad," Baldwin wrote. "While many in society may have trouble with social distancing or self isolation, the sisters are pros."

Dominicans of Peace

The coronavirus pandemic "has impacted us tremendously," said Sr. Susan Olson, mission group coordinator of the Columbus motherhouse of the Dominicans of Peace , one of two motherhouses in Ohio.

"For our sisters, the biggest thing is going from being independent on varying levels to being hugely interdependent, knowing that what happens to one of us happens to all of us," she said. "The communal common good has become key. We've had to implement things that people I am sure are not happy with, but they have adjusted with grace, and that has been really heartwarming."

The 75 sisters at the motherhouse, part of the 417-member congregation spread over 22 U.S. states and in Nigeria, are accustomed to having meals together. On March 13, that changed.

In addition to the large communal dining room, the motherhouse has 11 small-group living spaces that include a kitchenette, dining room and living room. Each of these small groups has become its own community, and the sisters in each group eat their lunch and dinner together. If any sister should get sick, it will be known who has been in contact with them, Olson said.



From left: Sr. Mary Ann Fatula, Sr. Catherine Malya Chen and Sr. Mary Jo Knittel of the Dominicans of Peace make masks at the community's motherhouse in Columbus, Ohio. More than 20 sisters are involved in making masks in the dining room, practicing social distancing. Sisters in the skilled nursing facility help by cutting fabric. (Courtesy of the Dominicans of Peace / Jean Sylvester)

Meals are delivered to the small dining rooms and are no longer served as a buffet. There's been an added benefit to the change to eating in small groups, she said: "Sisters are getting an opportunity to talk with people that they may not choose to sit down with and learning the backstories that help build the community."

Sisters are also making masks for health care workers.

"Our sisters here are so wanting to help," Olson said. "As soon as we created this project, there was a palpable feeling of hope. They weren't going to sit around and not acquire a virus. They were doing something useful."

About 20 of the sisters have been working on the masks, practicing social distancing in the big dining room with tables 6 feet apart. Even some of the 48 sisters who are residents in Mohun Health Care Center, the skilled nursing facility that is separate from the motherhouse but connected by a tunnel, help by cutting fabric.

There are 11 mission group coordinators in the congregation, and leadership pulls them together periodically to check on morale and needed assistance. One small community made a prayer on YouTube about the practice of social distancing with the theme of "Be Not Afraid."

"Ministry is as much to the sister right next to you as to the outside world," she said. "We are standing elbow to elbow while social distancing, but we are all in the same moment of time. For the first time, it's a worldwide moment of being in connection with one."

Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration

When students at Viterbo University wanted a blessing as they transitioned to online classes March 23, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration had a problem: They founded the university in La Crosse, Wisconsin, but couldn't gather to give the blessing, and the students couldn't gather to receive it.

Technology came to the rescue: The sisters used Zoom to gather and sing a blessing, which was then recorded and shared via YouTube.

"May the blessing of the Lord be upon you. We bless you in the name of the Lord," the 26 sisters sang.

Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration used Zoom to gather and sing a blessing for students at Viterbo University March 23 as they transitioned to online classes. The blessing was recorded and shared via YouTube. (Courtesy of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration)

Within St. Rose Convent, the congregation's motherhouse, Masses are livestreamed and community prayers are said over the loudspeaker, allowing sisters and essential staff still working onsite to pause for common prayer.

The sisters also made a commitment to maintaining community with the city around them: On March 24, they announced they were giving $500,000 to a local COVID-19 relief fund, more than tripling the amount raised to $739,000.

"It's heartbreaking not to be able to reach out in the ways we always have been able to," Sr. Eileen McKenzie, the community's president, said in a written statement announcing the gift. "We are used to being present with people in their time of need — praying with them, listening to them, holding their hands, driving them to their appointments, serving them in person. ... In such uncertain times, we must take care of each other."

McKenzie said the hope is the gift will inspire others to join in the efforts.

"We're grateful to be able to give in this way and hope others will give in the ways they're able," she said in the statement. "The spirit of giving is contagious, and that's the goodness we want to spread right now."

Sisters of Benet Hill Monastery

With the monastery closed until at least April 30, Sr. Clare Carr, prioress of the Sisters of Benet Hill Monastery, said she is saddened that the new reality has shut off sisters from interactions with members of the Colorado Springs community, both outside and inside the monastery. But one consequence of responding to the pandemic has been a quieter day-to-day life for the 22 sisters at the monastery and the five who live in neighboring Kansas.

"It's difficult. We're a pretty active crowd," she said. "To have our wings clipped is not easy. But we have the tools of our prayer life. That's a great gift."

She added: "There's grace in this. We're not running around so much. We're really talking to each other. It's a way to deepen our prayer life, our life together."

New rituals have begun, like frequent game nights, as well as time for communal baking and cooking.

"We're in a community. We have each other," Carr said.

The sisters are adhering to safe practices within the community, such as frequent hand-washing, she said, but they still sit together normally for meals.

For now, Carr said, her congregation is adopting the official liturgical understanding of *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*.

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It's hard being isolated from those in Colorado Springs who support the sisters and attend workshops and classes at the monastery, Carr said.

"We do love the community we're a part of," she said. "But we're finding other ways to reach out to them."

The sisters have sent emails, created Facebook posts and website messages asking for prayer requests, and have talked to at least 100 people by phone.

"We carry people in our hearts, prayers and our thoughts," Carr said.

Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word

The clear priority for the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word was to close their many operations and "ensure the safety of the whole extended Incarnate family," said Sr. Teresa Maya, general superior of the congregation, which is based in San Antonio. Those measures included bringing home their university's study-abroad students and putting their residences for the University of the Incarnate Word on lockdown, with international students relocating on campus if they couldn't return home.

Maya served on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious presidential team from 2016 to 2019. Her congregation has about 260 members throughout the United States, Mexico and Peru.

Her congregation's leadership is focusing on the safety of its sisters at their retirement center, The Village at Incarnate Word, by ensuring the older sisters are sheltering in place and the facilities comply with health measures. Maya also said they're thinking about their sponsored ministries, making sure those who work with "the most poor and vulnerable have the resources they need."

Older sisters who live in the retirement home miss interacting with other community members, Maya said, but they especially miss not being able to volunteer in the

hospitals, tutor or take part in other programs.

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"They wished they could be out there helping people directly," she said. Still, "our task at this time is to bring the spiritual energy into our world and to have that prayer be a blessing and a grace to all the people on the frontlines so they feel we have their back."

Older sisters have lived through war, so understanding solidarity and sacrifice is "in their DNA. There's a readiness to be there for the common good that's wonderful to watch," she said.

"At the same time, religious life has been talking a lot about meaning-making and accompaniment," she said, adding that showing solidarity and being a neighbor to those in ministry is "a part of the DNA of the life, and I see that right now."

Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia

With 213 sisters among the 280 residents on lockdown in the retirement community of St. Joseph Villa in Flourtown, Pennsylvania, the rest of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia are particularly mindful to keep in contact with them via phone calls, email or FaceTime, said Cecilia Rupell, communications director. Associates and alumni from Chestnut Hill College, which the sisters founded in 1924, are also connecting with them, she said.

The general council recently visited the villa and stood outside, waving and holding signs of appreciation, which was a videotaped as a special Easter message.

Because they have about 630 sisters in 125 convents in 13 states, mostly in Pennsylvania but also in Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey, the community has long used videoconferencing as a way to keep in contact and for prayer, Rupell said. Sisters and villa residents stay connected to their families and friends through FaceTime calls. At the villa, a closed-circuit television system allows the sisters to attend daily Mass virtually.

Sr. Mary Skopal, director of pastoral care at St. Joseph Villa, said she and her team are being proactive in attending to the needs of our sisters and residents, especially because sisters and residents are confined to their rooms.



The dietary staff of St. Joseph Villa, the retirement community of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, encourage people to stay home to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia)

Sisters and residents write prayer intentions that are posted on a television channel for all to see.

"The sisters take seriously their responsibility to pray for the needs of our world as well as our families and friends," Skopal said. "We consider the villa our powerhouse of prayer."

Some villa sisters have begun to make masks for their caregivers. Congregational president Sr. Maureen Erdlen has videotaped messages to be shown at the villa to remind the sisters that they are in other sisters' minds and hearts.

The motherhouse is closed to visitors, and only essential staff is allowed in. The Sisters of St. Joseph are keeping associates engaged through regular emails and discussion groups, Rupell said.

"I think we're speaking more to each other now than when we're there at the motherhouse," Rupell joked.

Sisters in another convent suggested that they "bring someone to supper" through a photo or story to share.

"It's an ideal time for sisters and associates to do what they do best and be a unifying and healing presence."

Vietnam

Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception

Sr. Maria Nguyen Thi Lan from the Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception's motherhouse in Hue City said they start their daily work at 4:30 a.m., praying six times a day, gardening, looking after poultry, cooking, sewing masks for themselves and other people, and producing altar bread.

She said the nuns have no breakfast and no meat and keep silent to pray every day for the end of the coronavirus pandemic. They pray for Pope Francis and church leaders to be in good health, for scientists to soon find medicine to combat the virus, for health workers to be healthy and serve sufferers, for patients to be recovered and for the dead to be in God's kingdom.

Lan, 43, said the nuns wear masks, restrict their travel and meetings with outsiders, cleaning and working privately. They suspended all their services and ministries outside their convents. Only three sisters who work at local hospital are allowed to go out.



A Daughter of Mary of the Immaculate Conception prays privately March 30 for the end of the coronavirus at the chapel of the community's motherhouse in Hue City. (Joachim Pham)

They call and encourage people with HIV/AIDS and other patients and their friends to take care of themselves.

She said they also face a lack of food, as their day care centers have shut down because of the coronavirus outbreak. Local benefactors and nuns from other convents supply them with food. They grow vegetables and raise pigs and chickens for a living.

The 100-year-old congregation has 344 sisters working in many dioceses in the country.

Daughters of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary of Bui Chu

Eight sisters at the convent of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary of Bui Chu have lost jobs since their day care center, which serves 40 children, was closed for the COVID-19 pandemic in January, said Sr. Theophane Doan Thi Chuyen, head of the Rosary Convent of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Rosary based at Tu Trung Parish in Nam Dinh Province, northern Vietnam.

"We lost our income and face a risk of losing food. Now, our daily meals are mainly rice and vegetables and, rarely, meat," she said. The sisters grow vegetables and raise poultry and fish in the garden for a living.

They spent 30 million dong ($1,300) to repair the day care center in December, so they no longer have money in reserve to buy food. Chuyen, a 53-year-old dentist, said she sometimes goes out and gives medicine to local patients at their homes and is given eggs, rice, fruit and money as payment.

The convent is closed to outsiders, and the sisters limit their travel and work from home to avoid exposing themselves to infection. They have reduced their pastoral work at parishes.

"We work on our own work privately, have no time to gather for talks, and take turns to cook daily meals and enter retreats," she said.

In addition to their four normal prayer sessions and daily Masses, the nuns recite extra rosaries and eucharistic adoration to pray for an end to the pandemic.

> 'We feel peaceful and trust in the Divine Mercy.'
>
> —Sr. Theophane Doan Thi Chuyen
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Chuyen said Sr. Marie Ignatius Nguyen Thi Nga, superior of the congregation based in Nam Dinh Province, calls on all sisters to fervently pray for the pandemic to be stemmed, live in solidarity, maintain their daily activities and help one another to overcome the hard time. The congregation has 500 members working at eight communities.

"We feel peaceful and trust in the Divine Mercy," she said.

Zimbabwe

Handmaids of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

Zimbabwe's 21-day lockdown began March 30, but the Handmaids of Our Lady of Mount Carmel have vowed to keep their faith in God, no matter what. They believe the world needs divine intervention above everything else.

"We are making use of our common belief. That is: faith, hope and love of God to keep us going in these testing times in solidarity with the global world. We sing, pray and watch news to keep ourselves in tune on what is taking place around the globe," said Sr. Annah Mandeya, a Carmelite sister in Zimbabwe, one of seven sisters in the convent.

This is a trying time not only for them, but for the entire world, said Mandeya, who also works as a child protection officer for the African Forum for Catholic Social Teaching, known as AFCAST, at Arrupe Jesuit University, which is now closed.

The sisters keep a distance of 1-2 meters when staying and working together and constantly wash their hands. They are still having common meals, recreation and prayers, she said, albeit with adhering to social distancing guidelines.

"The sense of community life is still there, though shaken and scarred to some extent," she said. "We are now screening and discouraging some communications. We have stopped attending Mass, and we are now resorting to services in our very small numbers. It has resulted to having funerals being attended by very few people, and we are all discouraged to go home for funerals," except for immediate family.

"Pope Francis' involvement gives us a lot of courage and hope in these testing times," she said. "He is helping us to feel and realize that we are not alone. God is in our midst in all these very scary times."

[Doreen Ajiambo, Gail DeGeorge, Patrick Egwu, 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.