Blog
Coronavirus
Religious Life





by Pam Hackenmiller

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Global Sisters Report recently asked readers how COVID-19 has affected the way they keep community and form/maintain relationships. Readers responded with how they use prayer, online meetings, and snail mail and phone calls to stay in touch. You can share your response by filling out this form. Answers have been edited for length and clarity.

My community at large continues to hold Zoom and BlueJeans meetings, which help us to stay connected and also to continue our ministries. Personally, this was a challenge in the beginning and, of course, continues to be. I had retired on March 1 from my ministry as spiritual care coordinator at a retirement center. So, here I was, retired and in isolation, as well. To add to the challenge, I live alone. I have connected with a local hospice group, and they sent me the ability to write notes to staff and those who are patients. In addition, connection was made with a local group working with dementia patients in homes. We set up virtual cafes where we can talk with the caregivers and their loved ones. Readings, conversations, prayer and simple crafts help to make the time fruitful. Calling shut-ins or people who are alone now has also been a way to connect and show that we are all one and united in thought and prayer. Seems simple to be able to reach out to so many who are in need at this time. The Spirit moves us. We just need to listen.

SR. ROSE MERCURIO

School Sisters of Notre Dame

North St. Louis County, Missouri

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I live in Paris, which has been transformed into a ghost town. Normally, the neighborhood is full of students, tourists. It is noisy and lively, but very anonymous. It is now deserted, and yet I have met neighbors (at a distance) that I have never seen in the three years I have been here. We open our windows at 8 p.m. or go out onto our balconies and applaud in support of the hospital staff and, at the same time, greet and wave to each other. I am discovering my neighbors for the first time! We are using all the communication means possible to stay in touch and encourage each other, especially the sisters at the motherhouse who have been hard hit. Not being able to properly celebrate funerals and say goodbye to our deceased sisters has been very hard, but I have come to feel a very close communion with these sisters and a relationship that reaches beyond the grave.

How have you seen COVID-19 restrictions affect your ministry or ministries?

I work with the homeless in a "bagagerie" where they can leave their personal belongings in safety. We have kept a minimum service going and been a lifeline in providing the papers necessary to circulate and access to gel, a toilet and washroom. They are minimum gestures but appreciated — they know they are not forgotten. The parish churches have been vital in continuing to get food supplies to the homeless and in keeping going the winter shelter programme beyond the closing date.

SR. RHONA BURNS

Filles de Jésus de St. Joseph de Kermaria

Paris, France

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Generally, we are four sisters in our community. But now, two sisters are out of town for a meeting and stranded because of lockdown. Two of us look after our candidates and a college hostel for girls, which is 10 kilometers away from our community. The prime minister of India suddenly announced a 21-day lockdown to curb the spread of coronavirus. During the days of lockdown, grocery shops, vegetable markets and pharmacies were to remain open for certain hours at a

certain place in this part of the country. This is a bigger virus now in rural India. This demanded us to engage in chores: cooking, marketing, driving, attending to the needs of the hostel and so on. It was another opportunity for us to accept our candidates to live with us in the community; they have a separate community from the apostolate community. This helps us strengthen our relationship by witnessing to our candidates and our charism of family spirit, perpetual adoration and option for the poor through our concern and action. In the community, we divide house chores among ourselves. Besides community prayers and adoration, we have an hour of adoration individually. All these help us strengthen our bond together. We are getting to know each other better while concern for each other genuinely.

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How have you seen COVID-19 restrictions affect your ministry or ministries?

COVID-19 restricted us to refrain from our usual ministry physically. It called us forth to answer the needs of the hour. In India, religious communities and boarding hostels sent the people home because of the fear of coronavirus. We kept our candidates and college-going hostel girls with us to save them from any ostracization in the villages for fear of spreading coronavirus from the city. It entails us to take care of their food, look after them and guide them to cope with their overlong leisure time. One of the locked-down days, I was driving to the girls' hostel to deliver a gas cylinder and some provisions, without which they would go hungry. The police stopped me. He asked me why I was out when I was expected to be indoors and if I have a permit from the department of police to go out. I had to hide the fact that I was going to the hostel, as the guideline of the government was to close the hostels. I faced this trial in several of the traffic posts until I reached the hostel. I smiled at them and talked to them pleasantly. Except for a cellphone, I had nothing with me. Not even a money purse for any emergency or to give a bribe to the police for breaking the guidelines, as it is done generally! I consider this as God's blessing because the people in India have been reporting horror stories about the misconduct of the police. I was praying in my heart that they would not harm me physically. God saved me from every harm and from any danger. I am keeping in touch with my sisters in other parts of the world, families, friends, acquaintances in and out of India every day to know how they are and how they are coping with the

present situation, a kind of being present at this global emergency. Humanity for the first time is witnessing the reality in recent times of our common origin and the common end, regardless of age, color, race, gender, religion, belief, place of birth, social, economic status, and so on.

SR. SUJATA JENA

Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary

Bhubaneswar, India

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How have you seen COVID-19 restrictions affect your ministry or ministries?

The Opening Word Program is a sponsored ministry of the Sisters of St. Dominic in Amityville, New York, and has almost 30 years of attending to the language needs, citizenship preparation and job training for immigrant women. We are affiliated with the New York state BOCES education/vocation programs. As of March 13, our classes have been discontinued, but our connection to the women continues through Facebook, weekly phone calls assuring their needs are met by directing them to nearby resources. We have over 200 women and their families that remain in our concerns during this pandemic. These connections are solidified by total staff weekly conversations to address any issues we need to discuss to further assistance in any way students need us. These works have been our prayer.

SR. LAURA HELBIG

The Sisters of St. Dominic, Amityville, New York

Williston Park, New York

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I accompany 20 people monthly for spiritual direction. I have been calling each one of them to have sessions on the telephone and assure them that they can call me when they need to talk.

SR. HELEN MARIE RAYCRAFT

Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, Wisconsin

Austin, Texas

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Cards and cookies — they're not just for Christmas! I'm staying connected with my sisters using good old-fashioned snail mail to send Easter cards. A lot of our older sisters don't have access to or know how to use technology, but I know they will appreciate a card. I also baked a couple of batches of cookies and delivered them to sisters who live in my area.

How have you seen COVID-19 restrictions affect your ministry or ministries?

I am a spiritual director and retreat facilitator. I have been "meeting" by phone or video call with most of my clients. It's not the same as being in the same room, but there is still a connection, and my clients have really appreciated the time we can spend together. I have also been writing a weekly reflection and sending it out to my clients and the retreat center email list. Obviously, group retreats are impossible right now, so that element of my ministry is on hold.

SR. GLENNA CZACHOR

Wheaton Franciscans

Wheaton, Illinois

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We have had a great connection with the women at Fordham University and Fordham alums who frequently come to our house. Since they are all home and sheltering in place, we have connected each Wednesday night for prayer and sharing via Zoom. We have also connected some of our sisters that live alone into our prayer. It has been a rich sharing and is great to see each other.

SR. MARY CATHERINE REDMOND

Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

New York City

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We have an intranet, and many of our sisters, associates, agrégées and partners in mission are sharing news and resources. Last, we also participated in the Massachusetts "clap-out" [outdoors applause for essential workers] on Friday evening. We will do it again.

How have you seen COVID-19 restrictions affect your ministry or ministries?

We have 11 congregation and sponsored ministries (seven corporately sponsored and four congregation ministries), and all are technically closed but all are working remotely to stay in touch with those they serve. The schools are doing wonderful things with online learning. The other ministries are responding in ways suited to their situation.

JOANNE GALLAGHER

Director of communications, Sisters of St. Joseph of Boston

Brighton, Massachusetts

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Almost as soon as the restrictions were made effective, I decided to either write a card or call a sister in my congregation or a friend with whom I have not talked for some time. I am fortunate to live with another sister, so we have made community prayer a priority as well as community fun (playing cards, etc.). We eat together regularly and have enjoyed more time to cook and bake.

How have you seen COVID-19 restrictions affect your ministry or ministries?

I work with a vulnerable immigrant population. We have had to close our center but, in conjunction with the hospital system that serves our area, we are figuring out ways to keep in touch and get needed assistance for food and household supplies to families. The health system's foundation has made an emergency grant available for this purpose. I've also been in regular phone contact with as many families as I can.

SR. RENE WEEKS

Dominican Sisters of Peace of Columbus, Ohio

Leetonia, Ohio

[Pam Hackenmiller is managing editor of Global Sisters Report. Her email address is phackenmiller@ncronline.org.]

Tell us: How has the coronavirus changed your community and ministries?