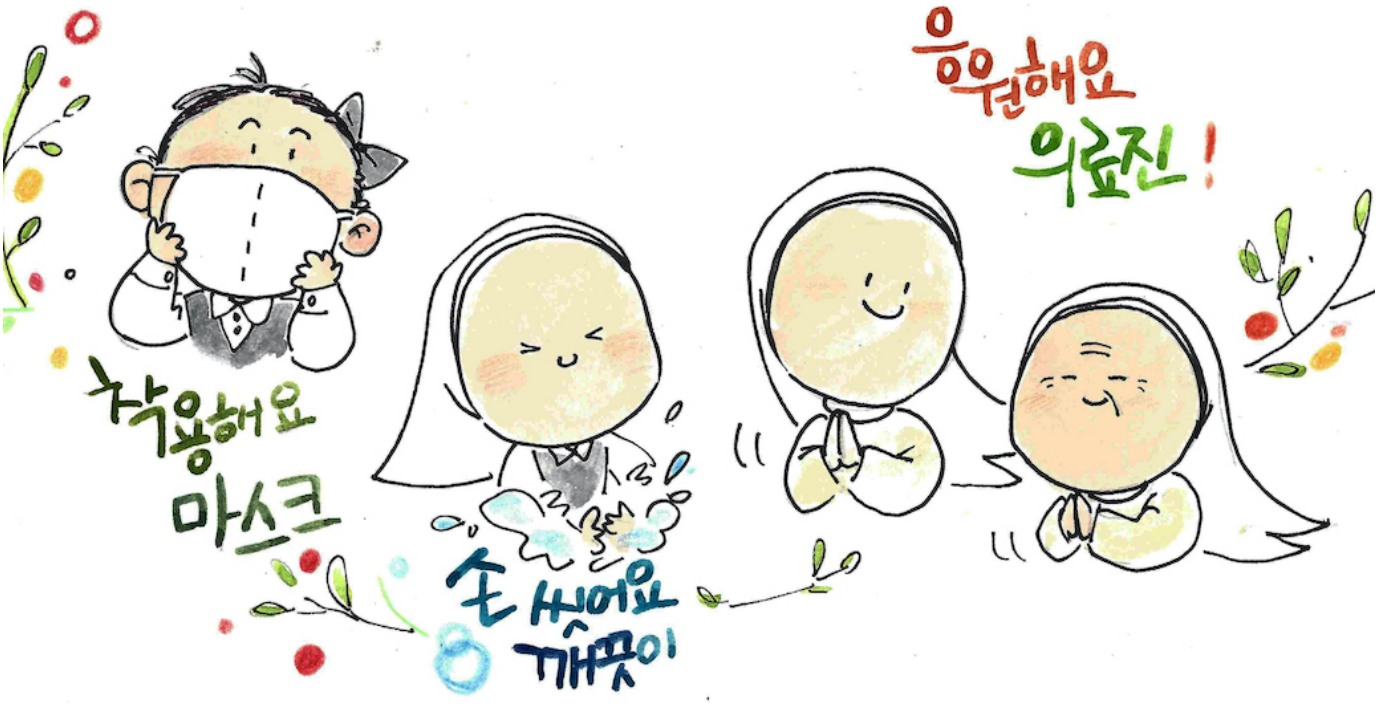
Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Ministry



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)



by Michael Sujin Yoo

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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 overcoming 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.



A letter that the novitiate sisters of Busan Olivetan Benedictine Sisters wrote together, cheering for front line health care workers in South Korea (Busan Olivetan Benedictine Sisters)

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.

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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 gimbap, 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 of the homemade scones, cupcakes, sandwiches, gimbap, rice cakes and pastries shared with health care workers (Provided photos)

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.



Right: Sisters preparing food for health care workers; Bottom left: A sister works on making masks for people who can't buy them. (Provided photos)

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.



March 22, all Korean sisters joined all the UISG members in the prayers of solidarity with the world. (Olivetan Benedictine Sisters in Busan, South Korea)

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.



From the Korean: "We are with you in our prayers." (Artwork by novitiate sisters of the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters in Busan, South Korea)

[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.]