Blog
Coronavirus
Religious Life





by Pam Hackenmiller

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

May 1, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint



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. Answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Presently all the world is seriously facing COVID-19. The number of deaths is increasing highly in some countries. Proudly, Vietnam, a poor nation, up to now has not had any deaths. But the Vietnamese president continuously reminds citizens not to neglect prevention during the pandemic. He also asked to close most of restaurants, shops, bars, and amusement parks, not gathering outside. To protect the health of community and nation, citizens should stay at home, limiting going out to prevent the spread of pandemic. Understanding the needs of the poor in the pandemic, the Dominican Missionary Sisters congregation of the Phu Cuong Diocese in Vietnam have volunteered to cook meals for the poor. The average daily is about 200 servings to help the poor overcome this pandemic. Through this pandemic, we have a chance to look back on our religious life, and our sisters constantly thank God for giving us his abundant graces, particularly for sending us charitable organizations and benefactors so we can reach out to the poor and help them in the present difficult situations. This is also the mission of the church and our congregation: to bring God's joy and happiness to the poor. "Whatever you did for the least of my brother and sister, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

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

We had to stop teaching catechism for children in parishes, and we must attend online Mass every day on the diocese's website.

SR. MARY NGUYEN THI PHUONG LAN

Dominican Missionary Sisters of the Phu Cuong Diocese, Vietnam

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

***

In addition to using Zoom for region and committee meetings, we also had a social Zoom gathering for two hours. It was wonderful: In addition to talking about how COVID-19 is touching us, we also talked about its local impact where we live and our community and others internationally. We held phones up to the screen to show family baby pictures, cartoons and even our household plants! Loads of laughter lightened our hearts.

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

We canceled workshops and face-to-face spiritual direction. Instead, we have done direction by phone, Zoom and WhatsApp video and stayed connected with those who usually come by tech means.

SR. VERONICA BLAKE

Sisters of Mary Reparatrix

Port Huron, Michigan

***

I live in a community alone, and another sister who comes regularly was caught in lockdown in another place. But we have a bigger community of 17 stay-in staff and volunteers. Other staff members live around the area, so they can come during the day. For our other programs — campus ministry in a nearby university, seminars on organic farming, horticulture and agri-crops, retreats and recollections, learning center for children, campus ministry, pastoral work, disaster risk management, and other projects for rural folks — we were able to concentrate on meetings and

dialogue, prayers together, silence and reflection. Our relationships have become closer and authentic, in the sense that through our reflection and sharing together, better understanding, compassion and forgiveness have become a daily endeavor. For the first time, we had a very meaningful Holy Week among ourselves instead of giving retreat to other people. COVID-19 has many difficult challenges, but we are turning every difficulty into opportunities to deepen our relationship with God and with one another, and see how God is moving in our lives and where God is leading us.

Advertisement

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

The Religious of the Sacred Heart does ministry in one of the poorest provinces in Southern Philippines through the Sacred Heart Institute for Transformative Education (SHIFT) Foundation Inc. at Sophie's Farm in Mondragon, Northern Samar, Philippines. SHIFT been engaged in organic farming as an advocacy and part of its educational mission. When COVID-19 became a pandemic, all educational programs of SHIFT stopped, except for the lettuce farm. As a community of sisters, staff and volunteers, we discerned on how to sustain ourselves and at the same time think of how to help others. We have decided to continue our lettuce salad production for the front-liners who are the heroes of today rather than to waste our harvest. The front-liners risk their lives 24/7 to save the COVID-19 victims, first and foremost — the doctors, nurses, and different service groups. We will continue to supply healthy food to front-liners and those in need as long as we can with the help of other people who care.

SR. LYDIA COLLADO

Society of the Sacred Heart, Quezon City, Philippines

Mondragon, Northern Samar, Philippines

***

We come to each day with a profound gratitude for health, at least to this point, and with a deep sadness and grief on so many levels. What a wake-up call, reminding us that we are indeed all connected on this planet and to Earth. The pandemic proof of this is perhaps one of the toughest lessons we will ever learn — if, in fact, we are open to such learning. It is indeed a "let the ground lie fallow" experience with a change of pace, more exercise, along with communal prayer integrating creative resources and making a concerted effort to be kind and patient with each other when we are living so closely together. It also means connecting regularly via Skype with my blood sister, who is also an SSND, experiencing a "stay at home" order in Guatemala. It is a moment to consciously decide each day how and with whom we will connect, realizing that we are all vulnerable and are longing for connection. One piece of good news: Most people can be found at home these days, and we all seem less rushed in "getting on with it." We noted that the season and spirit of Lent offered a lens, a way to find deeper meaning in the pain of our present reality. Focusing on the paschal mystery, especially the Passion and death, created a deeper awareness and invited a more conscious response. But with the Easter season, the lens has shifted, and trying to cope with the ongoing challenges of being apart from everyone takes on a different feel. As the days wear on and we once again hear the Easter readings and profess the Resurrection, we sing 'alleluia' with tears in our eyes and a lump in our throats, doing our best to trust in the one who promises life.

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

I minister as a facilitator/consultant, which at this point means that my work with congregations of women and men religious is all over the board in terms of future planning, ranging from happening, sort of happening and not happening depending on the situation. It is definitely not business as usual. Not traveling is a huge shift for me, and I miss it, especially those with whom I connected on the other end. And I'm learning that there is a point at which one can get "Zoomed out." I am grateful on one hand that such an option exists, but realize in a new way that it has its limits. Congregations are struggling to make decisions regarding any kind of timeline, especially those facing chapters, elections, etc. Flexibility is the name of the game. There is no getting back to "normal," which is the good news/bad news. So what is evolving? What really matters at this time? One congregational leader commented that the best preparation for chapter, whenever it happens, is to live each day with

the greatest degree of consciousness regarding our present reality and to keep asking ourselves, "What am I/are we learning at this time, and how will we be changed by this experience as we look to the future?" So it is not a matter of just finding new dates for these postponed gatherings, but rather to consider in an ongoing way what it is that we most desire to be about and say to each other when we eventually come together? Meanwhile, how will we be for and with each other? What do we most want to offer this planet and its inhabitants as women and men religious? These are questions to be considered not only by those with whom I work, but by me, as well. How am I being drawn to minister differently? This is a profound moment of communal discernment, and I hope I/we don't miss it!

SR. CATHERINE BERTRAND

School Sisters of Notre Dame

St. Paul, Minnesota

***

Our community here in Ligao, Philippines, is very intact, with a visiting sister from France who was stranded when the government announced the lockdown. We have stayed in the community for one month now and are very good and healthy as ever. We may not be able to visit our central house in Manila, but we can still communicate with our sisters through social media. We are in our seventh day of community retreat, as we call it in this time of health crisis.

SR. MA. CYNTHIA MICABALO

Religious of the Virgin Mary

Ligao, Albay, Philippines

***

I live in a community of three sisters. Sr. Felicity Marie Madigan and Sr. Shelley Marie Jeffrey minister in Detroit. My office is at our larger convent (Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Convent) in Livonia. Since the outbreak of the virus, we have been distanced from our sisters. It is difficult being away from them and not being able to help or comfort them. Four of our sisters have passed away of natural causes

in the past week and we, like many others, have not been able to say good-bye.

I am the director of internal communications. It is my responsibility to network the Felician Sisters across North America as well as coordinate, design and distribute information within the province. This is most often done through a daily newsletter, emails and/or an app. We now use these vehicles to pray together, support one another and share our COVID-19 experiences.

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

We moved to Detroit four years ago to live what we call the "ministry of presence," to be present to the people and provide help wherever possible. In the past year, we started a small nonprofit cafe for the disadvantaged. This is another way for us to create relationships and access the needs of the people. With the onset of COVID-19, the sisters have moved from the coziness of the relationships they're creating in the cafe to collecting food, creating bags for distribution and making face masks. Three days a week, the sisters round up volunteers and beat the pavement collecting food. The other two days, they distribute food packages and masks to the guests who drive up to the cafe. They don't judge, ask questions or check identification — everyone gets fed. This is not the norm in many food pantries. These women realize that everyone should be able to eat, no matter when, why or for what they are hungry.

SR. MARY FRANCIS LEWANDOWSKI

Felician Sisters of North America

Detroit, Michigan

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

Related: GSR readers share how the coronavirus has changed their communities, part one