Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus



A man covers his face with a handkerchief for coronavirus protection in Mumbai, India, June 17. (Dreamstime/Srinivas Akella Ramalingaswami)



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Most countries are either in a health emergency or lockdown to control the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. India has been under lockdown since March 25, which was extended to May 17. People were told to stay home. Some can work from home, but the vast majority cannot, and only essential services are open. Due to the restriction of movement, we can't meet anyone for months. These days are like a desert experience for me.

When the government announced the lockdown, I didn't take it very seriously at first. I just thought it affected only Wuhan, a city in China. So we didn't realize its full effect or negative impact. News and awareness of COVID–19 flooded the media.

Meanwhile, I felt the initial experience as artificial, strange, unusual and a different rhythm of life. But gradually, I began to feel relief from the doldrums of my hectic life. Now I am living a relaxed life — the whole time is for me. I can do whatever I like at home or in my room while maintaining "social distance" — but this begins to hurt me and many others, too.

Although there is a loss of human life around the globe, for the Earth it is a time for repair and maintenance. The environment can breathe fresh air. With significantly reduced vehicular movements, and factories, companies and mines closed, there are fewer emissions of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide or other poisonous/harmful gases.

We can see a cleaner sky, no longer thick with fumes but blue and gray and clear. No pollution of air, water or atmosphere. There is clean fresh air — and yet we are putting masks on. The birds are singing again, but there are reminders everywhere — "Stay Home, Stay Safe!"

A home is a place that guarantees our safety and security. Coronavirus is outside our home. Can we avoid going out except for emergencies? We need to protect ourselves from possible infection. There is no vaccine yet and no cure — only death! The government and other agencies have done more than enough to raise our awareness.

While staying at home, I have realized several things. Most people around me are eating simpler homemade food and putting a limit on junk food. So, we may have fewer ailments and less tension, and feel healthier in a cleaner atmosphere with a peaceful mind and attitude. All this is possible for those who can afford to stay home

and have the means to survive.

However, the plight of stranded migrant workers across the country has been miserable amid the lockdown. They are struggling for daily survival with little or no provision for food, shelter and other basic amenities. In my capacity, I have had some satisfaction in helping some groups of stranded tribal laborers.

For students and their parents, the lockdown has adversely heightened their anxiety, as it has affected their education. To address this, educational institutes have been forced to depend on online learning. We are using social media to get connected, caring and communicating through mobile phones. These electronic gadgets have become the need of the hour today.

In the wake of lockdown, daily attendance at Mass and other forms of religious activities is on hold. While some have missed the usual holy Mass and other sacraments, the impossibility of frequenting them physically has made real the true and genuine faith in the eucharistic presence and the grace of other sacraments like the sacrament of reconciliation.

Faith is as strong and firm as before lockdown. People are longing to worship and to receive Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

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Online services were made available for the Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Easter. We had no choice but to recite the act of spiritual communion promoted by St. Alphonse Liguori during holy Communion.

Home has become truly a domestic church, a sacred place of worship. I can hear the beautiful and devotional chanting and singing of religious hymns. Sometimes live, sometimes through a music player. I can also hear the sound of *Shankh* (a conch shell of ritual and religious importance in Hinduism and Buddhism) and other prayers recited by our neighbors of other faiths. How wonderful to hear these through almost every door and window of our house!

Before the lockdown, all looked busy. Now, there is sufficient time for families to be together and spend quality time with each other, sharing family joys and sorrows and having meals together.

I manage to spend the time as fruitfully as possible. Media and technology have become the usual pastime and our only means of communication. This is also a time for catching up with work, reading books, watching films. It is time to be introspective about my own life, values, choices, actions, and priorities, and to implement work and activities that interest me.

And it is a time for household and personal works — cleaning, cooking, praying, arranging my cupboards and tables, and washing clothes. And there are occasional morning and evening walks in our neighborhood.

I also spend more time in personal prayer and meditation. I meditate on a few biblical texts that remind me of the primary call of my religious life: Luke 4:18, Isaiah 61:1, Matthew 25:35, John 20:19-29, John 6:1-13, Matthew 14:15-21 and Psalm 91. And I did an online retreat guided by the Jesuits April 5-12.

I live with one other sister in my community; the other sister is a nurse who works at a private hospital just 10 minutes' walking distance away from our home. When she goes for duty, I have to stay alone in the convent and do the household work. I do it with great happiness — as I never did during my office days (before lockdown)!

The only time I feel lonely is when I have to eat my meals alone. So I switch on the television and watch the news, serials or movies that I rarely did during ordinary weekdays/working days before the lockdown.When I am alone and there is no one else to communicate with face-to-face in the community, I value the silence. And so, I often sit in the chapel or lie down and reflect upon the Gospel and epistle readings of the following day.

The new normal is: staying at home, using a mask when going out of the house, using sanitizer, washing hands frequently, using gloves and maintaining social distancing.

The concept of "social distancing" gave me a new insight. We have been socially distant from the poor in our neighborhoods, the elderly in homes, immigrants, refugees, and the tribals/Indigenous. And even worse than being distant, we've also talked about "these people" and what they need even while we distance ourselves from them. When was the last time one of the people I'm *talking about* sat at my dinner table?

I hope and pray that when we exit from this lockdown, we will leave our homes as people who are more accommodating, a little more compassionate and loving to the poor and each other. This would be a valuable and unexpected flipside of the lockdown!

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