Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Ministry




Sr. Vivien Echekwubelu, registered nurse and member of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, in her protective gear on shift at a hospital in Baltimore, Maryland (Provided photo)



by Vivien Echekwubelu

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COVID-19 has forced many of us to review what we do and why we do it. It makes us feel vulnerable, but I notice that people with strong faith can navigate the uncertainty better.

I am a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur and a full-time registered nurse working in a hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, in the neuro-stroke critical care unit.

This pandemic has made me think of the reason I became a nurse. As a young child growing up in Nigeria, West Africa, I was passionate and eager to help people around me and to bear other people's burdens. I used to go out with other children from our "children ministry" to visit the sick and lay hands on them — not knowing God was guiding me in the direction of my nursing vocation.

COVID-19 is unprecedented, and its impact has been overwhelming, because of the many uncertainties at the beginning of the pandemic. I came to work one Monday evening, and my unit manager told me that our unit had been converted to the COVID-19 unit for the hospital. The hospital, like many others, had no preparation to manage the emergency, and having to pioneer this new move was challenging and scary. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was much misinformation about the protocol for this new virus. The media did not help at all, because of the misinformation some of the media was spreading.

During the first days of the pandemic, I was afraid of contracting the virus, and I was equally worried about bringing the virus home to the sisters in my community. I think my experience working as a nurse in Nigeria during the HIV/AIDS pandemic without any proper training and adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) helped me to overcome that fear. I worked as an OB-GYN nurse delivering babies from mothers infected with HIV without even wearing gloves — but God kept me safe!

This is different: I never imagined anything like what we are experiencing today. Personally, I did not know much about this virus, and I'm not sure many others knew. Even today, there are many unanswered questions about the virus. We have seen many patients lose their lives to this deadly disease without their loved ones around them, but we also know many patients who recovered after contracting the virus. We know hospitals are trying different medicines, plasma transfusions, and

sharing techniques to care for the patients and minimize their discomfort.

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The fears continue and are real, especially working in the frontline. Two things minimize my fears: knowing more about the disease and how to care for our patients, and overall, the conviction I have of God's protection for all of us. God continues to keep me safe.

Most of my shifts are long and stressful. I have to wear PPE, and wearing an N95 mask for over 12 hours makes me feel lightheaded from time to time. The reward is seeing patients get better and being discharged. I recall that at the beginning of the pandemic, three young nurses (recent graduates) resigned because they were afraid of contracting the virus or rather were overwhelmed by the number of cases.

As an experienced nurse, I remind other nurses that the best way to deal with this crisis is to fight back. By fighting back, I mean doing everything possible to provide the best care and support to our patients. The desire to ensure that my patients receive the best care propels me to work extra shifts. I often work four nights a week, in 12-hour shifts. When I think of my patients, I feel the need to come back to the hospital even when I am tired. I have managed to keep a safe distance with the sisters in my community.

Some of the nurses come to me to talk about God — usually the middle-aged nurses. Younger nurses do not speak much about God. The hospital was founded by a religious congregation, and it still has its Christian legacy. They celebrate holy Mass in the hospital's chapel daily. Nurses have a daily meeting at 8 a.m., and often they start with a prayer; sometimes if I'm not there, someone in the team says "let's wait for Sister Vivien so she can start us with prayer." They know they can always talk about God with me.

My hope is in God, but finding joy can be difficult these days. I find my fulfillment in taking care of the sick, watching them get better and returning to their homes. The number of patients recovering from the disease gives me hope. It is a sign that we are winning this battle with COVID-19, although we are not there yet. People seem to be ready to move ahead, but we must keep watchful — people are still dying.

I feel deeply called to serve God through healing, and that finds expression in my nursing career. I also believe that nurses, as healthcare providers, have a caring spirit; we see the whole person that needs healing, not just the elimination of the disease. Through all this, God is with us. God is always here!

[Vivien Echekwubelu was born in Nigeria. She worked as a nurse in Nigeria, later coming to the United States to study for a degree in nursing. She has been a nurse for 28 years. Sister Vivien entered the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur 13 years ago. She is a member of the East-West Province, and lives in Baltimore, Maryland.]