Voices of Sisters

Coronavirus



Sr. Hilda Bernath, second from right in second line, on her first visit with her Franciscan Missionaries of Mary sisters in the Ancon District of northern Lima, Peru. The sisters work with women and children in the village and are here visiting a shrine to their founder, Mary of the Passion. (Provided photo)



by Sr. Hilda Mary Bernath

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The global pandemic of COVID-19 is affecting everyone in different ways. Each person is living with different aspects of the crisis. Amid these trying times, the lockdown imposed on people due to the coronavirus outbreak made me reflect on my quarantine period in the light of my Christian faith and my vocation as a nun.

I landed in Peru in 2019, as a Franciscan Missionary of Mary full of zeal and zest. Soon after my arrival, I was struggling to learn the Spanish that I need to work in Peru. At the same time, I was happy to be a part of a community with an attitude of universal mission.

The announcement of the sudden lockdown due to COVID-19 came during my Spanish classes and was a total shock for me. I was terrified all the more when I heard it was a total closure for most of the countries around the world. Now we all are under "house arrest" because of the coronavirus.

I am living outside of my home country of India for the first time, and I often get homesick. I miss my family, friends, sisters, country of birth and home mission. Yet following the footsteps of Jesus, Blessed Mother Mary and St. Francis of Assisi, I quickly adapted to the new situation and the new mission out here.

I miss my Spanish classes, and I am disappointed that I can't complete my course. Despite extra prayers and daily chores in our lockdown situation, it is sad to hear the tragic news related to COVID-19, and I can't sleep at night.

The lockdown has raised lots of questions for me — why is this happening all of a sudden? What is the reason? What does it imply? Is it good or bad?

Though I couldn't find answers, I was sure of one thing — that God protects his people. I remembered the exodus of Israel with Moses and how God protected them from all harm and danger and led them through the desert to the Promised Land.

I learned that I need to continue to trust in the Lord who loves his people unconditionally and not to give up the hope for a better future; as the angel Gabriel correctly said, "Nothing is impossible for God" (Luke 1:37).

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Before this time, there were always priests available, so religious had the opportunity to participate in the Holy Mass and to receive the Eucharist. It strengthened our life and gave us energy.

Now, it is painful to hear about the locked-down churches, and I am missing the real celebration of the Mass. I am realizing the real meaning of the Mass now. But we have a prayer and Communion service every day, so I am happy and feel privileged even in this critical situation. It is also agonizing to hear every day about the death of the priests, nuns and people from around the world. We never expected all this to happen. I cry and feel pity for the elderly priests who used to celebrate Mass for us who are unable to protect themselves from this deadly virus.

For the first time, there was no Easter celebration around the world, and I felt the pain of the people. The church is trying its best to meet our spiritual needs through technology. Online and internet facilities are a boon at this moment, and we are not denied all the spiritual services offered by the church.

Though I have no chance to go to the language class, I have been studying at home. I am also helping in the community by cooking, doing parlor duty, cleaning the house, and gardening.

I have also resolved to pray the rosary for people who are suffering during this global public health crisis. I spend much time with the Lord and read the Bible; I like what Psalm 91 says: "No harm will come upon you, no disaster will draw near your tent, in time of trouble I will be with you." I surrender everything to God, according to his will, because his love never ends. I feel he strengthens me to be stronger in faith. I never felt loneliness in community life or in my personal life.

I have different personal activities. Sometimes I listen to music, do silent reflection, personal prayer and adoration. I do my review of Spanish class, watch news and engage in self-talk. When I feel homesick, I accept the situation because many others are out of their own countries and away from their families for various

reasons.

In this global emergency, only prayer is the weapon to solve all the problems and save the people from their distress. I continue to pray for medical experts and all courageous frontline personnel who render invaluable service for the sake of others.

I am also cooperating with the government to stop the spreading of the coronavirus and maintain social distancing. But I hope these global coronavirus lockdowns will soon come to an end.

Having felt the challenges of the pandemic and lockdown, it is my opinion that every event teaches us a lesson of how to be good and to purify ourselves — including this COVID-19 pandemic.

Problems will come to an end, and I am not afraid to face this situation because God will not permit us to perish. He still loves us. The church and the other activities are locked down, but faith is not locked down. Everywhere people are praying for the world because we have hope that these adversities will not last long.

Maybe the coming days and these turbulent times will make us stronger in the Christian faith and keep us focused on God's power. Prayer may change us and make us resilient — it has happened before, in other problems the world has faced. Perhaps it will make everyone eager to participate in church activities!

Above all, during this critical time, we must continue to show our social solidarity for each other to brave this COVID-19 pandemic with faith, hope and courage.

[Sr. Hilda Mary Bernath is from Tamil Nadu, South India. With an academic preparation in education, Montessori, and child psychology, she taught school in both Tamil and English. She was also a gold medalist in sports. After becoming a Franciscan Missionary of Mary, she did graduate work in theology, spirituality and missiology. She then taught school and worked in formation with candidates and pre-novices. Presently she is ministering in Peru, studying Spanish and doing missionary work.]