Voices of Sisters
Ministry



Youth from Our Lady of the Healer Church, in Karumandapam, after Mass (Robancy A. Helen)



by Sr. Robancy A. Helen

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Youth saw the truth behind the words of Pope Francis when he said, "You, dear young people, are not the future but the now of God," at the end of the Mass which officially closed the 16th World Youth Day 2019 in Panama, Central America.

These words kickstarted my ministry as the animator of young girls of our parish, Our Lady of the Healer Church, in Karumandapam, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, South India. The group was named after St. Alphonsa (1910-1946), the first Indian woman saint.

In the past, I had always worked with children, which is very different than working with youth. I was assigned to be an animator for the girls and to accompany them, listen to them and motivate them. I need to be their friend and have tried to be their friend as Jesus is to me. Being with them has given added color to my religious vocation and pastoral ministry.

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It is challenging to guide young people in the present age. It requires dedication to update ourselves every day about the world, technology, religion, philosophy and every discipline of knowledge and information. I read a lot of books. I give them books to read. Once they finish reading a book, they circulate the book to their friends. Then I ask them to share about the book that they have read in the previous week with the group, for better collaboration and exchanging of ideas and insights.

Girls in India are forbidden to hang out freely due to age-old societal norms, dominant patriarchy and archaic orthodoxy, so we also started a choir for youth after many of the girls identified their talents like singing, writing poetry, drama, dancing and drawing.

To boost their confidence, I took them for meetings, cultural programs in the diocese and training programs where they met other youth and had exposure to new ideas. This helps them to expand their horizon and develop newer perspectives of life, society and the future.

I often remind myself of this powerful message of St. Ignatius, "You need to enter through their door and make them exit from yours." It is good to be with young people. In their presence, you become a new person, and your heart is full of hope, new energy, ideas and enthusiasm. This is my experience in being with youth.



Youth of Karumandapam parish who participated in the diocesan training program (Robancy A. Helen)

Youth are simple and lovable. Respecting their space and energy makes them able to be the "now" of God that Francis told them to be. I especially enjoyed being with them on Sundays after Mass. They are open to learn from others and to change for the better. Their attitude toward change motivated me to learn to have their attitude. Young people are not stagnant. They are like fresh water.

The Tamil Nadu Bishops' Council Commission for Youth designated 2019 as the Year of Youth, with the theme "Empowerment toward change." We inaugurated it with great zeal, inviting 5,000 youth from all over Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry State. But COVID-19 has delayed a vibrant celebration and stalled all our programs.

The whole world is fighting to save the lives of people who are afflicted by COVID-19. No one could have imagined that a year would pass without meeting people, being locked up. Meeting and conversing with people is our strength, but this pandemic has challenged everyone, especially the youth.

The first 15 days of lockdown to contain the coronavirus pandemic were manageable. India started its lockdown on March 25 and since then it has been extended several times. As the days went by, I started thinking about the young girls of my parish. As a result, I decided to start some online English classes, and prepared posters advertising them, to attract the enrollment of potential youth.

English is essential for all, especially the youth when they go for higher education or employment. Though English is taught as a second language in India, many young people cannot speak in English. Having these classes also gives them a meaningful way to spend their time during the lockdown.



Students show the certificates awarded when they participated in the online quizzes for the English classes Sr. Helen Robancy held. (Robancy A. Helen)

I telephoned the young girls of my parish and shared my idea. Some responded positively and passed on the information on social media.

As many as 15 students joined the online classes, which I divided into three groups. They are connected through Zoom and regular phone calls. The classes last for an hour. The students are not only taught English, but they are motivated also to read the newspapers and discuss in English whatever happens in society. We talk about culture, leadership and values, especially how to render our help during this pandemic.

I give them a test once a week to examine their progress. At the junior and senior levels, they took an online quiz, and winners were awarded a cash prize and certificates.

The classes are continuing, and we have a weekly Zoom meeting where the youth enjoy sharing ideas on personality development and social issues. They are happy to be part of this small group where their opinions are respected.

They are filled with positive vibes. They need to have freedom and guidance. When we respect them, they allow themselves to be guided. Loving our neighbor is to accept them and respect them regardless of who they are as persons.

Life and ministry with young people is a teaching and learning process. We have to be like butterflies dealing with them! They are confused by what they see in society. A platform like the church youth group will certainly help them to be on the right path toward empowerment and change for the common good. Let us show them that path now.



St. Alphonsa youth group members share lunch (Robancy A. Helen)

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