News
Religious Life


I have the power to protect!
I got the
COVID vaccination to protect:
myself and others with me.
Sister Mary Modesta

Felician Sister Mary Modesta Piwowar, 96, holds up a sign after her recent COVID-19 vaccination at the Felician convent in Livonia, Mich. (CNS photo/courtesy Felician Sisters)



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Felician Sister Mary Modesta Piwowar, 96, holds up a sign after her recent COVID-19 vaccination at the Felician convent in Livonia, Mich. (CNS photo/courtesy Felician Sisters)

This past year as the coronavirus cut through the United States, elderly women religious — former teachers, nurses, social workers and pastoral care leaders — were among those whose lives were cut short by COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus.

In some cases, these women, living in convents and cared for by their fellow sisters, died in clusters, leaving their communities with a magnified loss.

Groups of sisters who died of COVID-19 complications made headline news for their sheer numbers. The first was a group of 13 Felician sisters who died last spring and summer — 12 in the month from Good Friday, April 10, to May 10 — and another in June at their motherhouse just outside of Detroit.

In December, eight School Sisters of Notre Dame in Elm Grove, Wisconsin died within a two-week period. And by the year's end in New York, nine sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet outside Albany had died, along with seven Maryknoll sisters at a center for their order in Ossining.

In the new year, the virus continued its toll. Of the nine Adrian Dominican Sisters in Michigan who died in late January, six died within 48 hours.

"All of us share in this. We are all trying to do our best for our elderly sisters," said Sister Susan Francois, an assistant congregation leader for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, who has been in conversations with other congregation leaders about this devastating blow to the sisters many hold dear.

A common thread for the sisters who have died in the pandemic was their decades-long devotion to prayer and service, not just as individuals but as part of a community. As one sister put it: The sisters' congregational lifestyle makes them vulnerable to viruses.

Convents across the country have been practicing recommendations of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: face masks, social distancing, hand washing, cleaning surfaces and no longer gathering as a group. But still the coronavirus crept in.

And now with COVID-19 vaccines available, the urgency to get older sisters vaccinated, along with staff members involved in their care, is a top priority, but it's not always easy.

Since vaccines began rolling out in December, some elderly sisters have been able to get vaccinated, but not all of them. Many, who live with fellow sisters, not in assisted living or long-term care centers, are not at the top of vaccine eligibility lists. It also depends on where the sisters live and how their states are distributing

available vaccinations.

"We're trying to leave no stone unturned," said Felician Sr. Noel Marie Garbriel, the director of clinical health services for the Felician Sisters of North America who has been calling pharmacies and local and state government agencies to try to get older sisters vaccinated.

As of late January, the sisters in the Michigan motherhouse where 13 died earlier this year, have been vaccinated as have the sisters in a few other locations but there are still two convents where sisters have not received the shots.

Part of the problem is "convents are considered private homes, not care facilities," she said, even though the retired sisters receive care from staff members and other sisters.

On Jan. 28, Sr. Noel, who wears an N95 mask and also double masks, found out the order's sisters in Buffalo, New York, would be vaccinated in early February. She hopes all the Felician sisters in the U.S. and Canada can be vaccinated by Easter — which she said would be a resurrection of sorts.

Sr. Adele O'Sullivan, on the leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet and also a family health physician, has experienced the same inconsistency with the vaccines. At some convents, like the one in New York where nine sisters died last year, the sisters have now been vaccinated, but others, like the one in Los Angeles where she moved in the spring to help support the staff in their care for the sisters, have not.

"It's difficult for us just like the rest of the world," she told Catholic News Service Jan. 29.

She said the frail sisters, like elderly around the country who are not in care facilities, face the challenge of simply getting to a vaccination site. As she put it: "If you are bedridden, you can't be in a car for an hour at Dodger Stadium."

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In this time of waiting, as during the long months of this pandemic, she said the sisters have shown great resiliency. "So many of these sisters have coped with

tragedy and loss and change throughout their lives. These are strong women and they have pulled that strength out of themselves to cope with this."

To help protect them, she said she and other congregation leaders have been reaching out to everyone they can think of from long lists of community contacts and asking: "Can you help us?"

The older sisters absolutely want the vaccine, she said, because they have seen their peers suffer. They also want to be together again, and some want to get back to their pre-COVID-19 ministries.

The current isolation and inability to serve as they once did, in tutoring or parish work, is so hard for the older sisters said Sr. Marge Kloos, on the leadership team of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. The sisters at the motherhouse in Cincinnati had their first round of vaccinations and were scheduled to get the second dose in early February but other groups of sisters in other states are still waiting.

The sisters who spoke to CNS said their members are very much on board with getting the vaccine — unlike the U.S. public at large. However, the overall reluctance to get vaccinated is starting to wane, according to a poll released Jan. 27 by the Kaiser Family Foundation, which found that half of Americans, up from a third in December, say they want to get vaccinated as soon as possible.

Sr. Ricca Dimalibot, a Sister of Charity of the Incarnate Word, who is medical director of a clinic near Houston for uninsured patients, said the sisters where she lives have been fortunate to get vaccinated but many of her patients aren't considering it out of concerns or outright skepticism, despite her efforts to convince them they need it.

Mercy Sr. Karen Schneider, a pediatric emergency room doctor at Johns Hopkins Children's Hospital in Baltimore, also is encouraging people to get vaccinated after spending much of December at her order's motherhouse in Philadelphia initially to help a sister who was ill with COVID-19.

That initial positive case was followed by six other sisters testing positive and by the end of the month 21 of the 77 sisters contracted the virus. Four were transferred to the higher-care nursing convent and one sister died.

In between caring for the sisters, Sr. Karen went back to work and received the COVID-19 vaccine, which she partly felt uncomfortable about since her fellow, and

older, sisters at the motherhouse had yet to be vaccinated. But in a Jan. 25 blog for the Mercy sisters she wrote that she "would have been a fool not to accept it — the science is good, and the results are promising."

She also urged others to get vaccinated when they could, saying she was privileged to care for her fellow sisters, but she had seen enough and didn't "want anyone else to suffer needlessly."

In the midst of devastating effects of COVID-19, sisters have turned to one thing they know well: prayer. Sister Susan said the older sisters have been "a powerhouse of prayer" during the entire pandemic, praying daily for those suffering from the coronavirus around the world.

"Their hearts are on mission," she added, noting that although many at the congregation's motherhouse in Englewood, New Jersey, are discouraged by not being able to go out and help others now, they are helping in other ways by donating money and signing over their stimulus checks to the local parish food pantry.

The sisters, like so many around the world, want to get back to the way things were before the pandemic, which she pointed out will not be completely the same, but in the meantime, many of them also have a renewed appreciation for their community and their church.

Sr. Marge said the overriding sentiment right now from the sisters is one of deep appreciation for the scientists "who have spent their lifetimes understanding things like this and are helping us to move back into a cycle of life that feels more like our lifestyle."

"We are so grateful, " she said.