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Members of the Redemptoristine Nuns of Dublin take part in the "Jerusalema" dance challenge at the Monastery of St. Alphonsus in north Dublin. (Courtesy of Sr. Lucy Conway)



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Messages continue to flood in to the Redemptoristines at their monastery in Dublin after the community of contemplative nuns took part in the "Jerusalema" dance challenge in a February video that quickly went viral.

Speaking from Monastery of St. Alphonsus in Drumcondra, Prioress Sr. Lucy Conway recounted to Global Sisters Report, "People have told us that it gave them a lift when they really needed it. To see enclosed nuns full of joy in the middle of a pandemic, it made them laugh and cry at the same time."

The video shows the sisters in their distinctive red habits (postulants wear blue) dancing to "Jerusalema" around the cloisters and grounds of their monastery. The choreography was organized by Sr. Helen Freer from England, who taught Scottish dancing before entering, and postulant Deirdra Leone-Kearney from the United States, who was a ballet dancer for many years. Ten members of the community took part in the actual dancing while three older sisters can be seen on the video, clapping along.

"We're a fabulous community, full of happiness, peace and joy and service for one another," Conway said.



Members of the Redemptoristine Nuns of Dublin take part in the "Jerusalema" dance challenge at the Monastery of St. Alphonsus in north Dublin. (Courtesy of Sr. Lucy Conway)

The idea of partaking in the "Jerusalema" dance challenge was suggested by many friends of the community. The Redemptorists in Ireland had also decided to undertake the challenge and suggested that their sister congregation do it, too.

"We went ahead with it, as we like to use media in every forum that is handed to us and use it in a positive way to give glory to God," said Conway, who has been prioress of the enclosed contemplative community for six years.

The Redemptoristines were fortunate that iconographer Mihai Cucu, who has been staying at the monastery and assisting the nuns in creating religious icons, is also a videographer.

"He videoed us and edited the piece," Conway said. "We got so much joy out of it."

"It was a labor of love, and it was done as an initiative of prayer," she said. "Our first thought was to do it as a prayer for our suffering world. And our second thought was for the front-line workers and all those risking their lives during this pandemic. We continue to pray for them every day. Our wish now is that everyone would get the vaccine."



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On the day Conway spoke to GSR, the community was preparing to be vaccinated, a particular relief after six nuns died from COVID-19 at the Holy Family Convent in Newbridge, County Kildare, in late January and early February.

The response to the nuns' video of the "Jerusalema" dance was so huge that Conway hasn't been able to read all the emails and letters they have received, expressing people's delight at seeing the nuns dance the pandemic blues away.

"It has been unbelievable. We are getting letters and emails every day, and I'm replying every day," she said. "We got some gorgeous letters from older people. One woman told me that she was 88 and had liver cancer and that the dance had given her so much joy. We haven't had one negative reaction. A family in Kilkenny wrote to say it was lovely for their children to see the nuns and to see the inside of an enclosed monastery."

The pandemic has presented the enclosed community with many challenges, including the decline in demand for their main source of income: altar breads. There has been a ban on public Masses in Ireland since Christmas Day under restrictions aimed at bringing down COVID-19 infection rates, which rocketed in the aftermath of Christmas gatherings and the spread of a new, more transmissible variant. The Mass ban was also in place for most of the fall and the spring.

"Before the pandemic, 25 million hosts would go out in a year," Conway said. "The altar breads were so much part of our lives; making them was a prayer, as well. Every host that was handled was a prayer. They were prepared in silence and a prayerful atmosphere. Right now, it is down to a trickle, but priests' hosts are still going out. We pray that it will come back. Our finances have dipped terribly, but we are surviving."



Members of the Redemptoristine Nuns of Dublin with the icons they sell online as a way to supplement their income while demand for altar breads, their main source of income, remains low because of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Courtesy of Sr. Lucy Conway)

The sisters have been creative in finding new revenue streams through selling candles, icons, cards, beanie hats knitted by Conway and Sr. Gabrielle Fox, and crocheted baby outfits by Sr. Margaret Quinlan.

Conway underlines that people have been generous in their donations and, thanks to new member Sr. Stacey Cameron, their website was given an overhaul, and an online shop selling their produce has taken off.

"Every little thing will pay a bill," Conway quipped.

The affection for the Red Nuns, as the Redemptoristine Sisters are affectionately known, is demonstrated in small gestures, such as a neighbor in Drumcondra who brings the community meat or fish every second week.

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But the pandemic has also seen an upside for the sisters, and perhaps this explains some of the joy in their dance steps.

"We're getting new people," Conway said, smiling. "We've more inquiries, and we're hoping to make a foundation in India."

The community currently has 13 nuns, and a 14th, Sr. Nora Sheehan, lives in a nursing home close by.

"Despite the pandemic, two women have come to join us. It is extraordinary that this has happened," Conway said. Cameron was a member of an active congregation, while Leone-Kearney was a Redemptoristine in Liguori, Missouri, in the United States.

The community also hosted a Zoom and See a few weeks ago as an alternative to a Come and See. The oldest member of the community, Sr. Jacinta Kinsella from Cavan, who will be 93 in April, recounted her vocational story, as did Quinlan, who celebrated 70 years in the monastery in September 2020.

"They are just two wonderful women and two wonderful examples of perseverance and prayer for the world," Conway said. "It's great to have that age group, from the 20s to the 90s, in the community."

The Redemptoristine Sisters, who arrived in Ireland on March 3, 1859, are preparing for a second young woman from India to come to their Dublin monastery for formation this summer as part of their plan to establish a new foundation in India. There are close links between the Redemptorists in the two countries, Conway said.

"It'll take a while, but we feel now is the right time."