Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Religious Life



Thousands of sisters in Poland have volunteered and worked in hospitals and health care centers during the pandemic. Those too vulnerable to the virus to do active ministry helped by making masks, for example. (Courtesy the Conference of Major Superiors of Religious Orders in Poland)



by Dolores Dorota Zok

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Editor's note: *As part of our Coronavirus: A Year Later coverage, we invited leaders of women's congregational associations to reflect on how the pandemic has affected religious life in their regions. Some provided overviews; others focused on their individual congregations as emblematic of shared experience. This entry is from the Conference of Major Superiors of Religious Orders in Poland.*



(NCR, GSR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

The pandemic surprised us in various ways in our country of Poland. Our hospitals were not prepared. At the beginning, we weren't sure what to do. We were suffering with all who were in our hospitals without any help. Our hearts were ready to do something more for people who had lost their hope.

That is why we started giving our strength, our prayer and our hearts. Sisters volunteered in all of the voivodships (*województwo*), or provinces, in various ways because of the personnel shortages caused by the epidemic. In our city Racibórz, the local hospital was designated to care for coronavirus patients from the surrounding region. Sisters from our community and others volunteered to help prepare the hospital and assist how they could. There were similar situations throughout the country in which sisters volunteered.

There are about 17,000 Catholic sisters in Poland. Most of them are older sisters, in their 70s or 80s, so they had to stay isolated to avoid infection. Still, the older sisters

sewed masks and gowns for hospitals, nursing homes, health centers, community houses, the homeless and others. In my congregation of 72 sisters, for example, 40 older sisters who couldn't do other voluntary work sewed masks and did what was necessary. Around the country, more than 1,100 sisters were involved with sewing several hundred thousand masks, while 21 sisters sewed around 650 aprons.

Others of us volunteered in the hospital and elsewhere. There is a home for handicapped children in a nearby town. When the virus spread there, the employees went home to isolate, and sisters from our congregation and others came to help.

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Each one of us wanted to assist where people needed our real presence. We are happy that we have 32 sister-doctors and 1,020 sister-nurses who are serving in hospitals and health care centers throughout the pandemic.

One big part of our service for others involved about 300 sisters who are therapists who were helping the elderly, the lonely, the homeless and people in quarantine. They made themselves available through telephone help lines, Facebook and other media to offer psychological counseling, spiritual support and prayer.

In addition to their own jobs, sisters also helped prepare catechism and educational projects for students through Zoom. Schools were closed in Poland (and remain closed), so teaching is virtual. We are trying to educate children well in spite of difficult situations. We run 120 educational centers for about 1,700 children and young people in need of special care, and 460 sisters are employed by orphanages. If the virus affected these establishments, employees often had to go home, so additional sisters would volunteer.

In addition, sisters are helping to staff 80 community halls. Some of these centers had already been operating for children to come after school until parents pick them up in the evenings. More centers opened during the pandemic to allow students who could not stay at home to attend online classes during the day.



A Franciscan Sister of Love and Penance cares for a COVID-19 patient in Poland. Thousands of sisters in Poland have volunteered and worked in hospitals and health care centers during the pandemic, including 32 sister-doctors and 1,020 sister-nurses. (Courtesy of the Franciscan Sisters of Love and Penance and the Conference of Major Superiors of Religious Orders in Poland)

The real help we could give was in establishments that were already run by religious congregations that we continued to staff through the pandemic. For instance, women religious run 37 health care centers, as well as nursing and care facilities for

2,600 persons, and four rehabilitation centers, 56 nursing homes for children and youth that care for more than 3,800 patients; 60 social welfare homes for adults that care for over 4,300 people; eight care centers for the sick and disabled; 30 private nursing homes for the elderly and sick; seven houses for mothers with minor children; and 80 canteens for the homeless and food distribution points. As employees went home or had to be in isolation because of the virus, more sisters came to help.

Spiritually, we intensified our prayers for the end of the pandemic, for the sick and the protection of medical staff. Throughout the country, sisters prayed the daily rosary at 8:30 at night in union with the entire church to heal our country and the whole world and stop the pandemic. This is now done at 5:30 p.m. Sisters all have different prayer schedules, but we all pray the rosary at this time. Some of us intensified weekly fasting and other penances. Prayer kept people going in each situation of life!

Our churches did not close, but the number who could attend Mass was much smaller. Larger convents like ours often have a retired priest who lives on site and can celebrate Mass. There was no singing, and we kept distance from each other. Smaller convents would go to churches or attend Masses that were made available through computers or television.

We also introduced more time for silent adoration in our congregation. We used to have silent adoration twice a week for an hour. During the early months of the pandemic, we set up daily silent adoration from 3 to 6 p.m., a way of connecting and praying for the whole suffering world. Many other congregations also increased the time for adoration. This is a change that will last after the pandemic — we are continuing adoration every day, in order to connect with the suffering world of today, begging God to help us, to live in the Christian way, and we are asking the grace of healing for our people.

The pandemic affected community life. All of us were a bit more isolated, the older sisters particularly. Even if they didn't have symptoms they had to stay in their rooms for protection. This was a very difficult time, especially for older sisters to be alone in their rooms. They could hear the holy Mass and prayer but could not see each other. Now we can get together again.

Another change because of the pandemic is that the connection between the different congregations is much stronger than before. We ask each other about what

we are doing in different situations, and how we can help each other. In the houses for the disabled, for instance, several congregations came to help, regardless of which congregation had the responsibility to run them.



Sr. Dolores Dorota Zok, left, with other Mission Congregation Servants of the Holy Spirit in Poland (Provided photo)

In October and November, about 60 of our 72 sisters in our congregation were infected by the virus, and other congregations asked how they could help us. We also had never experienced so much help from people in the community around us. We wrote signs that we posted outside our convent that we were quarantined and could not provide for the homeless from our small kitchen like we usually do. Every day, we found gifts of different necessary things for our living outside our convent door. We had everything we needed, but it showed a big heart for us and selflessness from the community. In this moment it is very important to open our hearts for the pain of the world around us, believing our hope and love will bring us to our most peaceful place — to the heart of Jesus, who is our love. Selfless love is

the only real medicine, which our daily life needs.

Every day all the sisters in Poland are united in prayer, believing that God is our only healing in this world of today. Jesus we trust in *you* … in spite of all the pains in our hearts, we trust in your infinite mercy, we trust in you because you are the only love and truth. Immaculate Heart of our Mother Mary, we entrust you our own hearts, our families, sick people, lonely … the whole world. Pray for us.

This story appears in the **Coronavirus: One Year Later** feature series. View the full series.