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Fr. Ajeesh Chirayarikil, left foreground, helps Sr. Lisset Vadakkekara, at right in blue, administer an IV drip to a woman with COVID-19 symptoms in front of Jyoti clinic, managed by Congregation of Mother Carmel nuns at Chachana village in Gujarat, western India. (Courtesy of Chetan Parmar)



by Saji Thomas

Contributor

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When some 30 people thronged a church-managed clinic run by three Carmelite sisters in the western Indian state of Gujarat early April 7, Sr. Lisset Vadakkekara saw it as an unusual sign to bear witness to her role as a Catholic nun and a follower of Christ in a predominantly Hindu area.

Vadakkekara, a member of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel, is the supervisor of the Jyoti (light) clinic in Chachana, a remote village in Gujarat state's Surendranagar district that falls under the Rajkot Syro-Malabar Eparchy.

The 58-year-old nun said she had not seen so many people seeking medical help at the same time in her 28 years as a nurse in the five-bed clinic. She and two other sisters, also nurses there, scurried to fashion an open-air clinic with donated cots on Jyoti's campus to handle the overflow.

In Indian villages, nuns run clinics, called dispensaries, often the only health care available to the local people. Facilities like Jyoti are small with an outpatient section and a few beds. Seriously ill patients are referred to a city hospital.

When Vadakkekara approached the crowd that day, she was surprised to see them looking so pale as they experienced the fever, cough and throat pain symptoms of COVID-19.



A young girl with COVID-19 symptoms is brought on a three-wheeler taxi to Jyoti clinic, managed by Congregation of Mother Carmel nuns at Chachana village in the Rajkot Diocese in the state of Gujarat. (Courtesy of Chetan Parmar)

"They seemed frightened and utterly helpless. With folded hands, they asked me to check their health and provide medicines," Vadakkekara told Global Sisters Report.

The three Carmelite nuns checked temperatures, blood pressures and pulse rates.

"I was shocked to learn from them that all private hospitals, dispensaries and doctors' clinics in their villages were closed and doctors stopped seeing patients," Vadakkekara said.

More than 1,500 people from surrounding villages visited the makeshift outdoor clinic for medical help from April 7 to May 7, at the peak of the pandemic. The volume of patients has declined since the second week of May. "Now, we admit only

20 patients daily," said Sr. Tresa Kochumuttom, who has worked at the Jyoti clinic for 15 years.



Sr. Tresa Kochumuttom tends to patients lying on cots kept under a tree outside Jyoti clinic. (Courtesy of Chetan Parmar)

According to media reports, Gujarat was severely hit by the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic that started the first week of April. At least 9,890 people had died of COVID-19 as of June 2 in Gujarat.

Reports also said the second wave spread much faster than the first one that hit India in January 2020. The mortality rate, too, was reportedly higher in the second wave.

As sisters risked treating infected people, many of them dying, Kochumuttom said they realized the crisis was a special call for them to choose between life and death.

Their friends and well-wishers suggested they close the clinic until normalcy returns. "But ours is the only clinic in the area where people continued to flock with pleas for help," she told GSR.

She said they were not prepared to face the challenge but started treating patients, praying for heaven's protection. "We knew that dealing with COVID-19 patients without minimum basic protection could be fatal or suicidal," Kochumuttom explained.

The 52-year-old nun said they kept the clinic open after consulting their parish priest, Fr. Ajeesh Chirayarikil. "We were determined not to give up, whatever happens," she added.

Their five-bed clinic soon became a big hospital without a roof as about 100 patients turned up for treatment daily.

Vadakkekara said they had only five beds for critical patients to lie down and receive life-saving medication.



Patients who have tested positive for COVID-19 lie on two of the five beds inside Jyoti clinic, managed by Congregation of Mother Carmel nuns at Chachana village in the Indian state of Gujarat. (Courtesy of Chetan Parmar)

Realizing the nuns' plight, the villagers offered to help.

"Some villagers brought cots from home. One man erected a tent on our campus. Another brought water from homes for patients in the clinic. They also offered to attend to the patients," Vadakkekara said.

The nuns directed patients to lie under shade trees and in vehicles to receive IV drips. All sorts of vehicles came in handy, Kochumuttom said.

Their only aim was to save lives as they worked from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. in the first week of May and most days afterward.

Chirayarikil said the nuns had to skip breakfast and other meals many days when the patients kept them busy.



Villagers stay with their sick relatives under the shade of a tent erected on the campus of Jyoti clinic in Chachana village in the Rajkot Diocese in the western Indian state of Gujarat. (Courtesy of Chetan Parmar)

The 34-year-old priest also helped the nuns take temperatures and monitor IVs.

"We did not keep patients overnight in the clinic, but our doors are open at night, too," he told GSR.

Most patients had only mild symptoms and the nuns provided them basic medicines. They took swabs from critical patients and sent the swabs to a lab 15 miles away. "If the report is positive, we refer those patients to a government-designated COVID-19 hospital," the priest said.

Jinesh Bhai, a Hindu villager, said the Catholic nuns attended to patients "even at 2 a.m. without any complaint."

The 32-year-old member of the village council said they were frightened as many villagers developed high fever and other symptoms of COVID-19. "Doctors we used to depend on closed their clinics and hospitals in our faces," he told GSR.

> 'Now I realized the meaning of Christ's love. ... Now I have seen with my own eyes how Catholic nuns and priests dedicate their lives for others, risking their lives.'
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> —Jinesh Bhai
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He said they had no other option but to go to the nuns for help. "They readily came forward to help us, not bothering about their lives," said Bhai, who put up the tent on the clinic premises.

"Now I realized the meaning of Christ's love. I had read about the services of Mother Teresa, but now I have seen with my own eyes how Catholic nuns and priests dedicate their lives for others, risking their lives," he said.

Bhai said the villagers now plan to honor the nuns and priest after the situation improves.

"When other doctors refused to meet patients, the nuns without personal protection kits listened to each patient and administered the drip without gloves in an emergency," he said, adding, "I don't have words to explain their love for humanity."

Many patients had only mild symptoms, but still they treated them well, Bhai said.

Few risk their life for others these days, he said, adding, "If the sisters had not intervened in time in this calamity, at least 100 people could have died in this area."



From left: Chachana village council leader Jinesh Bhai, Fr. Ajeesh Chirayarikil, and Carmelite Srs. Lisset Vadakkekara, Tresa Kochumuttom and Joe Mary (Courtesy of Chetan Parmar)

Sr. Joe Mary, the latest to join the dispensary, said they had "concerns for our lives but we could not ignore hundreds knocking at our doors pleading to save their lives."

The 58-year-old nun, who had worked in Germany for 22 years, told GSR that the sisters gathered strength as day and night they repeated the prayer, "I am vaccinated by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, no virus can touch me."

She said they believed the blood of Jesus was flowing in them and that helped them to attend to COVID-19 patients without fear for their lives. COVID-19 vaccines are not yet available to the nuns in Chachana.

"We trust in Jesus and surrender to him and he takes care of us in this calamity," she told GSR.

Kochumuttom, who tested positive for COVID-19 after she started treating patients, said she had left everything to God and that made the real difference. "Now, when I look back, it is one of the best witnessings I could do for Jesus," she said.

She said they thank God for the love and care they experience from the people. "They realized we stood with them when nobody else dared to help them," she added.



Rathod Ashok Bhai, a villager who helps at Jyoti clinic (Courtesy of Ajeesh Chirayarikil)

Rathod Ashok Bhai, another villager who shares the common last name with Jinesh Bhai but is not related, said the nuns' exemplary services have won many hearts in the villages.

"My wife and two children are alive today because of them," he told GSR.

He said he was initially hesitant to take his people to the nuns, but finally went in desperation when their condition worsened.

He said the nuns went close to his people and touched their bodies affectionately to boost their confidence.

"I felt guilty that I did not touch my wife and children, fearing for my life. But the sisters, who are nobody to us, cared for them without any expectation."

He now volunteers at the clinic. "I have no fear for my life now. They have taught me that life is meant for helping others in difficulty," Rathod Ashok Bhai added.

Now, he and his family members pray daily for the long lives of the nuns and the priest.

Chirayarikil said the man comes often to assist at the clinic.

He said no patient has died in their clinic, which he attributed to the special protection of Jesus.

The priest says the calamity has given them an opportunity to emulate missionaries of the past who risked their lives to serve those infected with plague or smallpox.

"We too got a chance to work like them, risking our lives. Thank God we are all safe," the priest added.

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The Eparchy of Rajkot started the Jyoti clinic in 1983 to provide medical help to villagers. However, it functioned mostly as a mobile clinic, with the nuns going to villages because there was no transportation facility available for villagers.

The nuns stopped the mobile dispensary five years ago after most villagers bought vehicles.

Bishop José Chittooparambil of Rajkot said two more congregations — the Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and the Sisters of St. Martha Congregation — also opened their clinics during the surge of infections.

The Adoration sisters ran two clinics but closed one after all four nuns and a girl assistant there tested positive for COVID-19. "They are now recuperating in our hospital in Rajkot," the bishop told GSR.

The prelate applauded the nuns' boldness to risk their lives to help others.

"There was no guarantee that they would not be infected as people turned up in large numbers. There was no way to identify the COVID-19-positive people," he said.



An elderly nun who has tested positive for COVID-19 lies on a cot in the shade outside Jyoti clinic in Chachana village, Gujarat, India. (Courtesy of Chetan Parmar)

The nuns outlived their fears and dedicated their lives to serve others, he added.

"We are meant to be with people when they are in a crisis like this. If we turn our back to them, how can we call ourselves missionaries?" the bishop asked.

Asked if such services could violate Gujarat's newly amended anti-conversion law, Chittooparambil said they have faced no problems so far.

In April, Gujarat amended a 17-year-old anti-conversion law with stringent provisions, including 10-year prison sentences for religious conversion through fraud, coercion or force. Even a mere blessing could be construed as a violation.

"We are not afraid, as we are not converting anyone. If something happens for helping people in this crisis, we will deal with it then," the prelate added.

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing** feature series. View the full series.