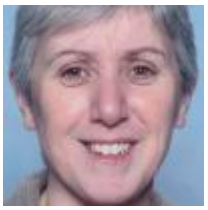
[Voices of Sisters]
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Sr. Lorraine Testa, an Augustinian, Servant of Jesus and Mary, in personal protective equipment (Courtesy of Lorraine Testa)



by Lorraine Testa

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June 17, 2021

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Sr. Lorraine Testa, an Augustinian, Servant of Jesus and Mary, in personal protective equipment (Courtesy of Lorraine Testa)

The year 2020 in Australia was like no other: first the fires, then the floods, then the country areas ravished by a locust plague (yes, even this) and, finally, COVID-19.

What else? How did we respond?

My answer as an Augustinian, Servant of Jesus and Mary was simply to respond as our founder Maria Teresa Spinelli responded — see the person, see the need, do the action. We remembered how, in the midst of a pandemic when there was a shortage of wine, she filled the jars of the less fortunate. When the church needed prayers, she prayed, she fasted. When people needed spiritual and physical healing, she showed empathy and ministered to them.

So, one day I was asked if I would agree to continue my ministry as pastoral caregiver in an aged care facility that had rising COVID-19 cases. Rosary in my pocket, profession ring on my finger reminding me of a crucified Christ, faith in my heart, the confidence of knowing Mother Maria Teresa Spinelli was with me (but with — I must admit — a bit of fear), I entered the door of the facility as I had been used to doing every day, knowing that future days would involve a very different kind of care.

That was March 19, 2020 — appropriately enough, St Joseph's feast day, the anniversary day of my first profession, the day I vowed to serve the church as a daughter of Maria Teresa Spinelli.

Slowly, slowly, I moved from just "social distancing," to wearing one mask, to full-gown protection. This personal protection equipment — which had to be changed after each pastoral encounter, at least 15 times a day — was vital for my safety, but not a guarantee of immunity.

It was challenging: first, accepting the mask and the shield that made my own breathing labored, and that is how it had to be as long as I need to wear this protection. Initially for four weeks, now this has become standard procedure whenever a state government calls a lockdown, resulting in a heightened sense of anxiety for not only the general public but more so for the residents, workers and their families.

More importantly, the accepting this new reality with this ministry continues to be difficult as we navigate the ever-emerging new strands of the virus.

For example, how to sit with those who have mild to severe dementia. How would they recognize me behind the mask? How would they hear my voice? How could I help each one understand that keeping them safe is only possible by making them

stay in the confines of their rooms — for all meals, all entertainment — and by limiting the human touch of people who want to hug them or hold their hand?

Looking at ways to lessen the sense of isolation, I decorated face masks and personal protective equipment (PPE), adding my own personal touch, like a name, image or photo — thus giving the resident a clear idea that it's me.

One of my favorite sayings of Spinelli, written in an 1843 letter to her spiritual director, is "Take hold of God's staff and go (in confidence)." This is what I did. I have learned by experience that my ministry is more important than any "full gown protection." Each visit reminds me that eye contact is heart contact. The elderly to whom I minister share their own prayers, pain and joy with me. In those days, in the absence of priests to celebrate weekly Mass, we shared the word of God.

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It was sad to sit beside those who were dying of COVID-19 — sometimes there was no priest available to administer the last rites, no family member to hold the dying person's hands, no opportunity for the friends they have made in the aged care facility to say goodbye.

So, on behalf of the community, I became the outstretched hand, the one praying over the sacred body of the one dying as he or she made the journey to the God who awaited. I can never truly realize how graced I was to be in this position. That God called me to minister in the last moments of another's life is beyond my comprehension.

And, after the death of their loved one, to talk with the family members to assure them that their loved one died with dignity and in peace, that was my opportunity to share their grief, to stand on their holy ground!

On reflection, since March 19, 2020, there has emerged — and it is still emerging — a whole new way of delivering pastoral care. Within this paradigm is the emergence of highlighting the need for front-liners self-care, the need for networking and resourcing to guard against spiritual, emotional and physical burnout.

I know, we know, that the road ahead is a long one and that there is now a "new normal" that requires me and others to believe that pastoral care cannot be ad hoc

but must be embedded in the delivery of care during this time and all times.

As a daughter of Maria Teresa Spinelli, I did this in the name of my community, who give me permission to minister on their behalf — and give me the support of their prayer — and for this I am grateful. Every day as I walk out the door, my community members tell me to take care, they pray for me while I am at work, and they care for me when I return. I am blessed. I am an Augustinian, Servant of Jesus and Mary.