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Priests pray over the body of Fr. Jerry Sequeira before his cremation in Ahmedabad, India, on April 18. (Cedric Prakash via AP)

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The coronavirus has taken a heavy toll among Catholic priests and nuns around the world, killing hundreds of them in a handful of the hardest-hit countries alone.

The dead include an Italian parish priest who brought the cinema to his small town in the 1950s; a beloved New York pastor who ministered to teens and the homeless; a nun in India who traveled home to bury her father after he died from COVID-19 only to contract the virus herself.

In some countries, most of those lost were older and lived in nursing or retirement homes where they didn't regularly engage in person-to-person pastoral work. Other places, though, saw a bigger hit to active clergy, accelerating a decades-old decline in the ranks that Pope Francis in 2017 called a "hemorrhage."

Coronavirus deaths among clergy are not just a Catholic problem, said Andrew Chesnut, chair of Catholic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, with faith leaders across denominations having elevated exposure rates as "spiritual front-line workers" ministering to the sick and dying in hospitals and nursing homes.

But the impact is particularly acute for a church that is experiencing a "perennial priest shortage" in most countries amid difficulties in recruiting seminarians, he added. And with Catholicism placing a greater emphasis on the role of the priest compared with some other denominations, the losses are keenly felt.

"If you already have so few priests and they're being decimated by COVID-19," Chesnut said, "of course that affects the church's ability to minister to its parishioners."



Fr. Jerry Sequeira, standing, preaches at St. Ignatius Loyola church in Ahmedabad, India, shortly before contracting and dying from the coronavirus in April 2021. (Cedric Prakash via AP)

India

Catholics are a small minority in India, comprising about 20 million of the 1.38 billion people in the mostly Hindu nation, according to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India.

But soaring reports of deaths among the clergy so alarmed Fr. Suresh Mathew during a devastating second wave of the coronavirus this spring that he began emailing bishops nationwide, asking for daily updates. Many mornings, he woke up to multiple alerts.

"It was a shock," said Mathew, a priest at Holy Redeemer's Church in New Delhi.

Roughly two priests and nuns were dying every day in April. The rate doubled in May, when Mathew recorded the deaths of 129 nuns and 116 priests.

The worst of the pandemic has abated in India, but not before he compiled a list of more than 500 priests and nuns lost since mid-April.

One of those losses hit close to home: Sr. Josephine Ekka of the Surya Nagar convent at his parish. She had traveled to bury her father in the village of Jharsuguda in eastern India only to fall ill herself.

Ekka joined the community in September 2020 amid the pandemic and became responsible for the liturgy and organizing the choir at a time when church attendance was limited. She was remembered for her kindness and devotion to the poor.

In the western state of Gujarat, where vaccinations were stalled by a powerful cyclone that hit as the pandemic surged, Fr. Cedric Prakash of St. Ignatius Loyola Church has been mourning five priests.

They include Fr. Jerry Sequeira, a close friend who on Easter Sunday baptized a newborn whose father died of COVID-19. A day later, Sequeira found out that he, too, had contracted the virus.

"His attitude was that 'nothing is going to happen to me, God is good,' " Prakash said. "He was always available to people."

The United States

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops says there is no comprehensive count of how many priests and nuns are among the more than 600,000 people who have died from COVID-19 in the United States.

It's well-established, however, that the toll includes dozens upon dozens of nuns who lived in congregate settings across the country, from upstate New York to Milwaukee and Detroit suburbs and beyond. Many were older retirees who dedicated their lives to teaching or nursing.

One order alone, the Felician Sisters, lost 21 nuns at four convents.

"Faith and hope both have played a role in my life as I watch the devastating news of loss," said Sr. Mary Jeanine Morozowich of Greensburg, Pennsylvania. "I couldn't go on without believing that there is some purpose, some reason for all of this."

Fr. Jorge Ortiz-Garay of St. Brigid Church in Brooklyn, New York, died March 27, 2020, and is believed to be the first priest in the U.S. to fall to COVID-19. The 49-year-old, who oversaw the diocese's annual Our Lady of Guadalupe Feast Day and pilgrimage for thousands of attendees, was remembered by congregants for his devotion to the community and leading youth groups.

Also among the lives lost was Reginald Foster, 81, a Wisconsin-born priest who served for four decades as one of the Vatican's top experts on Latin. He died at a Milwaukee nursing home on Christmas Day.

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Italy

Italy was one of the hottest of hot spots early on in the pandemic.

Through March of this year, 292 mostly older diocesan priests died of the virus, according to news outlets of the Italian bishops' conference.

SIR, the conference's news agency, noted that the toll nearly equaled the 299 new ordinations in Italy for all of 2021.

Among the dead was Fr. Raffaele Falco, a priest in Ercolano, near Naples. The 77-year-old was known for using his work to combat the Naples-area crime syndicate, the Camorra.

Also dying was Fr. Franco Minardi, 94, who arrived in Ozzano Taro in 1950 and served as its priest for 70 years. So committed to rekindling the faith in young people, he arranged for the construction of a theater where he projected the farming town's first movies. His legacy of outreach also includes a tennis court and a game room.

Sr. Maria Ortensia Turati, 88, was one of several nuns who died at a convent in the northern town of Tortona. Trained as a social worker, she served as mother general of the Little Missionary Sisters of Charity from 1993 to 2005 and founded missions in the Philippines and Ivory Coast.

Brazil

Through March of this year, at least 1,400 priests in Brazil contracted COVID-19 and at least 65 of them plus three bishops died, according to a commission linked to the National Conference of Bishops.

Among them was Cardinal Eusebio Scheid, 88. He became Rio de Janeiro's archbishop in 2001 and was named cardinal two years later by then-Pope John Paul II. In his 60 years in the church, he was known for his deep interest in the quality of the education for priests.

Scheid was also known for a comment some understood as political, others as a gaffe; he referred to then-President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as "chaotic" instead of Catholic. After a minor uproar, Scheid softened his tone, saying Silva sounded "confusing" on matters of faith.

[Associated Press writers Frances D'Emilio in Rome, Peter Orsi in Truckee, California, Mauricio Savarese in Rio de Janeiro, and Giovanna Dell'Orto in Minneapolis contributed to this report.]