Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus



Our sisters and other volunteers provide services to COVID-19 patients. (Courtesy of Teresa Joseph)



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Nothing else has affected India and the entire human family so strongly as the deadly COVID-19 virus. It has brought with it a kind of fearful and awkward situation. A dear friend of mine, a college professor, an expert in psychology, whispered over the phone: "I can't share with you what I went through as COVID-19 hit me ... Just when I wanted someone to hold my hands and assure me that 'I am there for you,' all I could see was my dear ones lovingly taking physical distance from me ..."

Right from the start, deep within me, I could feel that the world and those around us needed a lot of courage, hope and encouraging words to battle with COVID-19. A small group of us educators and journalists pooled our resources and brought out some soul-lifting articles and things to share, drawing from our own life experience.

Many people try to follow the guidelines proposed by the government to fight the pandemic: social distancing, washing hands regularly and maintaining hygiene, avoiding unnecessary meetings and the like. With my own eyes, I saw one of the bank officers sanitizing his hands each time he touched a sheet of paper; in a week's time, I was shocked to hear that he tested positive for COVID-19. Unexpected and sudden deaths crushed my heart many times.

At a convent at Chunangamveli, near Aluva, Kerala, 18 nuns tested positive for the virus. Sr. Ajaya Mary, the Delhi provincial of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, died on July 2. She was 67, the first Catholic nun to be cremated in India.

So many more: Renowned writer and Jesuit priest Fr. Varghese Paul died April 10 testing positive for the virus. Frs. Joy Karayampuram, Lijo Thomas, S. Christudas, Srinivasan, Diago Dsouza, Arulsamy ... among more than 40 Catholic priests claimed by COVID-19 in April in India. The Catholic Church in Gujarat lost five priests in 24 hours in the second wave of the pandemic, and several bishops have died.

Don Bosco Fr. Joseph Aymanathil, who had been feeding slum kids during the pandemic, succumbed to the virus. The 73-year-old priest had pioneered quality free education for underprivileged children for 30 years. He organized the relief work to feed slum children from Day 1 of the lockdown. His team continued his work at railway stations, even during his funeral.

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A number of our doctors, nurses, priests and sisters passionately committed to serve the needy and those affected by COVID-19 were attacked by the virus and lost their lives — 25 doctors died in 16-17 days.

Sixteen COVID-19 patients and two nurses died in a tragic fire in the ICU ward of Welfare Hospital in Bharuch. There have been many other hospital fires this year. And 12 people, including a doctor, died at Delhi's Batra Hospital on May 1 after it ran out of medical oxygen – for the second time in the space of a week.

It is evident that the pandemic has affected our mental health: the impact of lockdowns, uncertainties and restrictions, firsthand experience of the virus, the loss of loved ones, loss of jobs, financial crises. Counseling facilities are offered by various institutions, and the church and various religious institutes are offering online sessions/services/conferences. Several Catholic Churches in India have formed voluntary groups to offer dignified burial to those who have died of COVID-19.

There is almost an uninterrupted link that connects a vast number of people in prayer, imploring the Lord to bring to an end this terrible pandemic. Prayer campaigns and days of fasting are connecting many people across the world. On April 30, the Pune Diocese was led by its bishop in a Day of Prayer and Fasting to implore the Lord to end the pandemic.

The World Council of Churches and Christian Conference of Asia grieve and pray with churches in India as COVID-19 surges, and May 7 was observed as a National Day of Prayer and Fasting for an end to the pandemic.

Responding to calls from concerned COVID-19 patients is ever on the increase today in India. A good number of doctors, health workers and volunteers are passionately engaged in this delicate mission, offering comfort and solace to those in need.



A street boy, now working as a COVID-19 warrior, reaches out in service. (Courtesy of Teresa Joseph)

Recently, to my great delight, I received two lists: one filled with contact numbers of sister doctors and their availability to respond to calls, and the other showcasing whom to contact and indicating the best time to do it. Free teleconsultations are becoming more and more a daily lived reality in the midst of the rapid increase of the COVID-19 pandemic. What is to be admired in this process is the network of trust and confidence that is being built up among people.

Bihar saw a sharp rise in cases in April; in a 10-day period, it saw more than 10,000 cases every day. On April 29, the state added 13,089 positive cases, a record spike since the start of the pandemic.

So many organizations around the world are helping. The Church of Scotland is sending a 5,000-pound emergency grant to the Church of South India to support its efforts to help people. A Muslim man donated a large amount of oxygen. Catholic Relief Services and Caritas India are on the ground in the subcontinent, and are administering aid. No one knows if there will be a third wave of the pandemic but some are setting up crisis management groups to prepare for it.

Sr. Lucy Kurian, a Catholic nun who runs orphanages said: "We have vacated one of our homes for people from villages who need to be isolated due to the pandemic. We have also kept aside two ambulances for this purpose," and her group intends to distribute cooked food, grains, clothes, sanitizers and masks for those in need.

Sr. Moksha Antonappa, a Salesian Sister of Don Bosco in Mumbai, has begun online delivery of goods. Her group is constantly in touch with people in real need and with shopkeepers.

The terrible coronavirus has placed us in the liminal space between life and death. Certainly, there is fear, anxiety — precisely for this, we need an extra dose of courage. As a disciple and friend of Jesus, I am convinced that nothing is impossible with God. Above the terrible coronavirus there is a God, and we constantly request God to heal us and bless us.

We know the entire human family is with us; your solidarity and thoughtfulness continue to convince us that we are not alone.

Pope Francis' message reached us like a soothing balm as he prays for pandemic-stricken India: In a message dated May 6 to Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Bombay, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the pope wrote "to convey my heartfelt solidarity and spiritual closeness to all the Indian people, together with the assurance of my prayers that God will grant healing and consolation to everyone affected by this grave pandemic. ... With deep appreciation, I invoke upon all of them God's gifts of perseverance, strength, and peace."