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Ministry



Women and men religious arrive on Aug. 20 at Minh Tam Hotel, where they will stay while serving COVID-19 patients at local hospitals in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. (Joachim Pham)

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Hundreds of women and men religious in Ho Chi Minh City and two provinces in south Vietnam badly hit by the highly contagious delta variant of COVID-19 have voluntarily joined front-line forces for the fourth time in two months to take care of patients at hospitals and in isolated places.

On Aug. 20, 115 Catholics and Buddhists in the Ho Chi Minh City Archdiocese set off to work at hospitals for COVID-19 patients in Ho Chi Minh City. They follow the three previous waves of 260 religious volunteers who ministered to local hospitals for one to two months beginning July 22, Aug. 11-12, and Aug. 16.

Most of volunteers are sisters, and many will serve only one month so they can return to work for their day care centers as the new school year starts in September. The volunteers will quarantine for two weeks before returning to their convents.



Mary Queen sisters and other volunteers attend an Aug. 20 ceremony at Minh Tam Hotel to mark the fourth time sending religious volunteers to hospitals for COVID-19 patients in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. (Joachim Pham)

This time, seven Catholic priests and 85 religious from 14 congregations of women religious and 10 congregations of men religious based in the city were received at Minh Tam Hotel, where they will stay for one month while they work at the COVID-19 Resuscitation Hospital in Thu Duc.

Dalat Lovers of the Holy Cross Sr. Mary Bui Thi Bich Huyen said she and four other sisters from her convent will join the front-line workers. They each have received one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

"We feel we have an absolute duty to work with other people to care for patients as all of us are God's children," Huyen said.

The 41-year-old nun said they are nursery teachers and have no professional skills in health care, but "we can give patients our tender care, emotional support and prayers as they have no loved ones by their side. We pick up this chance to bring God's love to all people we serve."

Phan Kieu Thanh Huong, vice chairman of the city's Fatherland Front, an umbrella organization of the communist government, said she greatly appreciated local Catholic volunteers who bravely sacrifice themselves to look after patients and help reduce health care providers' workloads.

Huong said the conditions at the hospitals are not as good as the religious' convents and monasteries, so they have to try their best to cooperate with other people to provide good care for patients and push back the pandemic.

As of Aug. 25, Ho Chi Minh City and the provinces of Binh Duong and Dong Nai, the country's epicenters of the contagious delta variant, have recorded 289,084 infections and 8,395 deaths among the country's 381,363 cases and 9,349 deaths since the first cases were detected on April 27, according to the Ministry of Health.

Related: Sisters unload tons of food, feed hungry in Ho Chi Minh City's COVID crackdown

Dr. Le Anh Tuan, deputy director of the COVID-19 Resuscitation Hospital, expressed his deep gratitude to the archdiocese for sending another group of religious volunteers to the hospital.

Tuan praised the previous religious volunteers for their tremendous enthusiasm supporting patients and medical staff.

"The hospital would fail to operate effectively without volunteers," he said.

He said the hospital will offer the best and safest conditions it can to volunteers so they can bring real health benefits to patients. The volunteers will be tested for COVID-19 and train in basic medical care skills before they are sent to the hospital. Those who have not been vaccinated will get vaccines, and the volunteers will be trained in how to protect themselves from infection.

Mary Queen Sr. Teresa Mary Nguyen Thi Hong Hue said she and five other sisters had worked for just three hours at a hospital for COVID-19 patients as part of the first wave of volunteers in late July before they were put in quarantine after they were told they had contracted the virus. However, health officials later apologized for giving them wrong results: They did not have COVID-19.

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Hue said they registered to serve at the COVID-19 Resuscitation Hospital for one month this time.

"We eagerly work with others to bring God's love to patients who have no relatives by their side," said Hue, who works as a nurse at a day care center run by her congregation. She also takes care of elderly sisters.

Hue said patients in hospitals are too weak to look after themselves. Many are put on ventilators and cannot talk.

"Volunteers in full protective gear are assigned to feed serious patients through tubes, wipe their bodies, change diapers and sheets, clean facilities, collect waste and help medical workers treat patients," she said. "We show Catholic patients how to make a sign of the cross, encourage them to recite prayers and pray for dying ones."

"We are told that we face high risk of infection and can die, but we trust in the Divine Providence and believe God protects us," Hue said. "This is a great opportunity for us to bear witness to Christian values among people in misery."

On Aug. 20, Salesian Fr. Joseph Mary Tran Hoa Hung, who oversees all orders, societies and associations based in the archdiocese, said 352 priests, nuns and brothers have been sent to serve three local hospitals since July 22 at the city's request.



Fr. Joseph Dao Nguyen Vu, right, who represents Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City Archdiocese, and government authorities welcome religious volunteers to Minh Tam Hotel on Aug. 20. (Joachim Pham)

Hung said that 87 of them were put in quarantine on Aug. 23 for two weeks before they return to work at their convents.

Hung said the outbreak of the delta variant is still raging in Ho Chi Minh City, the country's commercial hub, so local health authorities sought help from the archdiocese. The city faces a severe lack of medical staff working with COVID-19 patients because of the number of people with the virus.

He said Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang called on local congregations to continue taking part in this charitable activity. He said local sisters, brothers, seminary candidates and novices between the ages of 20 and 50 are encouraged to spend one month helping COVID-19 patients.

Fr. Joseph Dao Nguyen Vu, who represents Ho Chi Minh City Archdiocese, and the city's authorities and health officials welcomed the religious volunteers. Vu said the religious who have been assigned to local hospitals graciously take on a high risk of infection to work in dangerous places and serve coronavirus victims.

"This is an excellent opportunity for us to show our creative vigor, love and care to medical workers and patients," he said. "What we have are our soft hearts and God's strength."

[Joachim Pham is a correspondent for Global Sisters Report, based in Vietnam.]

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