Coronavirus
Ministry
Q&As



Sr. Margaret Castro of the Sisters for Christian Community sits in her office Aug. 26 at St. Rita Catholic Church in San Diego, where she has ministered for 35 years. (GSR photo/Melissa Cedillo)



by Melissa Cedillo

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September 28, 2021

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After graduating from high school in San Diego at 17, Sr. Margaret Castro joined the Missionaries of Charity, founded by St. Teresa of Kolkata. For nine years, she worked in ministry abroad, serving those most in need. When it became clear that Mother Teresa would not be opening a ministry in the United States, she joined the Sisters for Christian Community and returned to San Diego to minister to Hispanic Catholics.

For 35 years, Castro has worked at St. Rita Catholic Church in San Diego. Members of the St. Rita's community speak English and Spanish and hail from a variety of places, including Guam, the Philippines and Nigeria.

Currently, Castro serves as director of religious education and adult faith formation, assisting with weddings, baptisms, confirmations and funerals. She mostly works with children ages 5 to 17 who are preparing for their first sacraments.

The pandemic has posed challenges to her ministry and her parish, but she remains hopeful and inspired by the youth she serves.

***GSR*: Can you tell me more about your family history and what it was like to grow up in San Diego?**

Castro: I was born in the historical park part of San Diego in a family of Hispanic and Jewish descent.

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My grandma was Spanish and my grandfather, Middle Eastern. My grandparents came to Pagosa Springs, Colorado, as refugees from Spain and were put into a refugee camp. Born in Pagosa Springs, my mom married a Mexican man; they moved to California, and she converted to Catholicism in order to marry him.

Growing up, St. Rita's Church was originally located in an all-white neighborhood in which I was not allowed. I vividly remember learning catechism in my hometown and trying to jump over walls to avoid going to class. The sisters had racing bikes and would collect us to go learn.

How has COVID-19 impacted your ministry?

The RCIA program was done through Zoom this last year. There were about 48 members who joined the English class and 12 who joined the Spanish class. But to my surprise, there was an increase of English speakers who wanted to receive their sacraments this year.

I couldn't believe it. The outdoor tent we set up for Mass was entirely filled. We blew people's minds. It blew my mind.

During the pandemic, St. Rita's also transitioned to hosting Mass outside with masks. At the end of these Masses, I would announce we had food and clothing for those who needed it. During the pandemic, I also converted one of the church's storage rooms into a place with food and clothing and was able to feed hundreds of parishioners.



A picture of St. Teresa of Kolkata and other items related to Mother Teresa and her community, the Missionaries of Charity decorate Sr. Margaret Castro's office at St.

Rita Catholic Church in San Diego. Castro is director of religious education and adult faith formation at St. Rita's. (GSR photo/Melissa Cedillo)

What were the biggest challenges this year?

To get as much food as we could for the people who needed it. And it seemed like everyone needed it. Many people in my parish lost jobs and lost loved ones during the pandemic, many to COVID-19. I worked hard to make sure that any family that needed help was attended to.

I believe many in my community came to realize that death is closer than people once thought. We had a lot of people affected. A lot of people died. We have just started to do funerals. Many of them were cremated and have been waiting. I am not exactly sure how many we lost, but it seems like every Saturday, we have a funeral or two.

What brings you hope?

While many parishes seemed to close or lose people this past year, the attendance at St. Rita's Church grew. I attribute this to more people being home, having time and not having to worry about commuting to and from work, especially when RCIA classes were available on Zoom.

During the pandemic, the young people I work with saw that they needed their faith to help them with their family life and daily life.

People want to learn about their faith. This last year, I witnessed an increase of young people who want to get married in the church and young parents bringing their kids who didn't before. I feel like the pandemic might have brought them to this point. Maybe the pandemic awakened something in people.

What's your advice for those who were raised Catholic but have been hurt or harmed by the church and are hesitant to come back?

I can understand that. I hope that as many look for something to help them during this pandemic, that young people remember that the church is here, and hopefully the work the church community has done to take care of one another this last year will inspire young folks and give them a new outlook on leadership.

When it comes to ministering to the younger generations, we have to keep going. Don't give up on them. Keep going. They are there. You [faith leaders] have to reach out to them.