Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Ministry



Holy Family Sr. Jean Martinez prays with the rosary group at Chateau de Notre Dame in New Orleans. (Courtesy of Jean Martinez)



by Sr. Jean Martinez

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Since Nov. 29, 2015, I have been a staff person in pastoral care at Chateau de Notre Dame, a nursing home and apartments facility owned and operated by the New Orleans Archdiocese. Our work consists of promoting and nurturing the overall health of the residents — a population of more than 200 even in these COVID-19 times.

Our pastoral care office prepares and maintains a sacred space where residents can daily participate in the eucharistic celebration, silent private prayer, adoration, confession and group rosaries. We coordinate a volunteer system that invites other people to assist the staff at liturgical activities, bringing Communion to the floors for those who could not or did not participate in the daily Mass, and visiting the residents.

Some of the apartment residents are also lectors and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion at Mass and to the floors. The residents, a mainly Catholic population, relish their participation at daily Mass. Their joy in singing and responses to prayers and their greeting of the celebrants, cantors and other helpers manifest their cheerful gratefulness. They also pass the missalettes, pick up items after Mass, and always, always ask how they can help.

Before the pandemic, apartment residents and a small number from the nursing home conducted a daily rosary. While they still pray the rosary, the nursing home participants have not returned. Surprisingly, however, a radiant nursing home resident recently asked if the nursing home group could say the rosary in the chapel. Of course, I agreed.



Holy Family Sr. Jean Martinez dances with one of the residents of Chateau de Notre Dame in New Orleans. (Courtesy of Jean Martinez)

I was delighted at their initiative, their resilience, and their wonderful communal spirit. This recent observation just filled me with hope. I could not help being thankful myself for the deep reciprocity of my ministry among the elderly of the Chateau.

The less mobile and bed-bound residents are not left out. Many of them participate at Mass through our in-house channel that is available in every room. In addition, staff members and volunteers bring Communion to the different floors. The bed-bound residents are the most reverent at Communion. They are profoundly grateful and, to me, awe-inspiring.

Both the Catholics and residents of other faiths are daily visited by the staff and volunteers. I remember well a Baptist resident who was always ready with a song we would sing together. I also recall with delight that when I did my video project for my course in the Loyola University New Orleans project Communicating Charism, funded by a Conrad N. Hilton Foundation grant, many of my participants were bed-bound residents of Chateau across denominations.

By now, one can discern that Chateau has become a home, my sweet heaven, and I am daily thankful.

All this came to an abrupt halt on March 23, 2020, when a phone message informed me that because of COVID-19, I must not return to the Chateau until further notice. Since there had been talk about the virus, I expected that we would eventually be affected. However, I did not expect it to last four months.

During the four months, Chateau had a weekly update. Our pastoral care team sent reflections and a weekly prayer intention through email. My job was to call 10 volunteers without email addresses with the weekly intention. I was happy to do that. It kept me connected to the Chateau family as nothing else besides prayer and strong hope could.

Homebound for no one knows how long, I turned to making regular intentional and more peaceful times for prayer. I must admit that I relished being among the sisters, immersed in the prayer-work rhythm of community living, which had been mostly absent from my life, since I have to report to work by 10 in the morning and 8 on weekends.

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Besides the weekly intention with the volunteers, I added special prayers for the nation and leaders in general. I also consciously heeded the mask mandate and

social distancing at all times, although I live with 40 sisters at our motherhouse. I took recommended supplements to build up my immune system.

I was deliberate in my self-care because, always and always, I wanted to be able to return to Chateau at the first indication of safety.

I did my COVID-19 testing as soon as it was available for health facilities workers, long before any other sister at our motherhouse. I meant to stay well in order to get back to our Chateau residents and keep them hopeful. The news about nursing home infections here and countrywide was utterly distressing.

Finally, when the apartment residents could have a drive-by visit, I drove by to wave. It was exhilarating to see them holding colorful welcome signs and waving. I learned later that they had been quarantined in their rooms all that time — no socialization, no visits from family — and thankfully, no COVID-19 either.

When the nursing home had their second drive-by, I visited. To visit, one had to make the request with the name of the resident and the visitor was assigned a visiting time. On the drive-by day, I visited with a resident, who came to the car. You could ask how they were and marvel at how well they looked. We thanked God for safety and hoped for the best.

The visits were too short, but it was all we could have. I longed to return to my job. Meanwhile, I followed every mandate that would soon bring us back.



Holy Family Sr. Jean Martinez takes a break from her pastoral care ministry at Chateau de Notre Dame nursing home to help with washing pots. (Courtesy of Jean Martinez)

There was insecurity about the possibility of a vaccine. I made up my mind early that I would take the vaccine even at the experimental stage. I am not afraid of vaccines. I take a flu shot every year, and in my country, we are given a BCG vaccine as babies to protect against tuberculosis.

When, at last, we could enter the facility, the residents were still quarantined. I did office work. The usual staff had been gone for months and there were uncomfortable changes. Only two sisters who were not residents returned — one for just one day a

week. I continued to go to work, although it was not required.

The light at the end of the tunnel showed when the apartment residents — COVID-free even today — could attend a Mass once or twice a week which a resident priest could celebrate. As his health deteriorated, another priest came on Sundays.

When an outside priest could not come in because of restrictions, we had Communion services — first alternate days for each group, then every day at different times for each group.

Eventually, both groups were united in one eucharistic celebration, and everyone was elated about the reunion. Since April 2021, outside priests have been able to celebrate Mass. Now separation at worship, meals and recreation are only mandated when there is infection.

Another return to apparent recovery occurred on July 1, 2021, with the archbishop's yearly Mass and social visit. The volunteers have not returned, but we hope they will soon. So far, activities and health at Chateau are fairly stable.

Everyone realizes that as long as COVID-19 persists, so will challenges. I believe that as long as concrete realities are enhanced by the spiritual, life with change — virus or no virus — is filled with enduring hope.