Ministry



Ranjitha, right, with Fatima Sr. Roseline Jose, co-founder of a ministry to the transgender community in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru. Ranjitha introduced the nuns to her community. (Thomas Scaria)



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The first time Srs. Saly Joseph and Roselin Jose met a transgender woman, they were waiting at a bus stand in a southern Indian city.

"Sister, can you come and pray for my mother?" the woman, Ranjitha, asked them.

Joseph recalled being hesitant at first, but when Ranjitha insisted, saying her mother was a Catholic and sick, they decided to accompany her.

That 2020 encounter paved the way for a special ministry among transgender people for the members of the Sisters of Our Lady of Fatima of Pune.

"It has been very challenging to get into their world and win their confidence, but today, we have around 200 of them undergoing our training programs," Joseph told Global Sisters Report.

In India's 2011 census, more than 485,000 people of the country's population of 1.21 billion identified as transgender. The survey was the first time India counted the number of people who identify as a third gender.



Fatima Sr. Roseline Jose, left, and Sr. Saly Joseph, center, members of the Sisters of Our Lady of Fatima of Pune, pose with a group of older members of the transgender community in Bengaluru, India. (Courtesy of Saly Joseph)

According to the LGBTQIA Resource Center, "identifying as transgender, or trans, means that one's internal knowledge of gender is different from conventional expectations based on the sex that person was assigned at birth."

Jose and Joseph say their goal is to support transgender people in their struggle for identity and justice. As part of their ministry, they conduct vocational skills training to shift transgender people from sex work and begging to alternate jobs. Some sell vegetables or manage kiosks and tea stalls after attending the training programs. Some are being trained in driving, tailoring and handicrafts.

One of them is Sheela, who sells flowers in front of St. Mary's Church in Bengaluru's Shivaji Nagar, a pilgrim center. Another person, Devi, who used to sell sex for a living, now sells vegetables. She and Sheela pray in St. Mary's shrine every day.

Renuka Pujar, who works part time in a steel firm, is working toward a bachelor's degree in law.

"I want to become a lawyer and fight for our rights," she told GSR.

Joseph and Jose never imagined they would start the special ministry when they accompanied Ranjitha to her home.

Her mother, who wore a rosary, was in bed in the small one-room house in Frazer Town, a suburb of Bengaluru city. The house looked clean with walls painted yellow. A picture of Mary and Jesus hung on the wall over the woman's bed with sandalwood sticks burning in front.

"We prayed for her mother while Ranjitha stood with folded hands in deep veneration," Joseph said.



Fatima Sr. Roseline Jose, far right, with novices and two sisters from the Society of Sisters of St. Ann of Luzern with a group of transgender women (Courtesy of Saly Joseph)

Although members of the trans community live together in their own exclusive communities, Ranjitha stayed at her house to look after her ailing mother, whom she had brought from her village after her father died.

Seeing the nuns were curious, Ranjitha invited them to meet other members of the trans community. The nuns found them living on the periphery of society and facing social stigma and rejection despite government efforts to recognize their identity and assure them protection.

Around that time, the Dream India Network invited women religious in Bengaluru to help the Salesian organization reach out to the transgender community. The network is an association of nongovernmental organizations working for people on the margins in India. It wanted to reach out to the trans community with food kits as the COVID-19 pandemic hit India.

Among the participants in that outreach were Joseph and Jose, who shared their experience of their encounter with the community.

Salesian Fr. Edward Thomas, founder of Dream India Network, invited the Fatima nuns to reach out to transgender people in response to Pope Francis' call to "accompany them" in their difficulties.

"The transgender people accept the nuns, who can easily win their confidence and trust," said Thomas, who commended the Fatima sisters for their service.

"More congregations can be involved in this unique ministry," he told GSR.



Sr. Saly Joseph, one of the two members of the Sisters of Our Lady of Fatima of Pune who founded a new ministry among the transgender community in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru (Thomas Scaria)

Joseph said their superiors approved their work with the network. Their first task was to identify and invite trans people to a meeting called by the Dream India Network.

More than 100 transgender people attended the network's first meeting in January 2021, most of whom had come through the initiative of the Fatima nuns.

Joseph said they got into "this challenging task without knowing anything about those people. But now we are convinced it was a divine call for us to serve them."

Jose said they travel almost every day to visit the trans community. When GSR offered to accompany the nuns in their ministry, they discouraged the plan.

"They do not easily open up to a stranger," the 57-year-old nun said.

Instead, the nuns invited some to the convent to meet GSR.

Jose said many transgender people invite the nuns to pray for them in their homes. Most houses keep pictures of Jesus, Mother Mary, Infant Jesus and St. Anthony of Padua along with Hindu deities.

Jose said she was surprised to see "great devotion, especially to Mother Mary," even though most of them are not Christian.

The nuns wear traditional Indian dress when they visit the trans community.

"People look at us with curiosity and suspicion and sometimes pass sarcastic comments, but we don't care. The third-gender people know who we are, and they protect us from the public," Joseph, 55, said.

Joseph regrets that the church has yet to understand the transgender people, despite the pope's call.

"If we cannot welcome them to our churches, at least let us reach out to them," she said.

Transgender people, she said, have been part of society from "time immemorial, but we never recognized them and, rather, kept a distance from them."



Fatima Sr. Saly Jose, left, Fatima Sr. Roseline Jose, center, both members of the Sisters of Our Lady of Fatima of Pune, with Ranjitha, who helped the nuns launch a ministry among transgender people in the southern Indian state of Bengaluru (Thomas Scaria)

Thomas said Bengaluru city alone has more than 10,000 transgender people among its 13 million people. Most of them earn a living through sex work, begging or religious activities, which includes performing prayers for pregnant women and newborns.

Ranjitha, who serves as a religious leader for her community for a living, said their number in Bengaluru could be 10 times more than what is shown in the census. Many did not reveal their identities during the census because of "a strong taboo," she said.

As the nuns served tea and biscuits, Ranjitha narrated her story.

"My original name was David, and I was baptized in a church, although my father was a Hindu," she said. "I was like any other child: mischievous, playful and obedient to my parents."

However, at the start of puberty, he faced an identity crisis and ran away from home to Mumbai, more than 600 miles northwest of Bengaluru. As he roamed the streets, he met members of the trans community.

The group "formed me into a transgender [woman] by providing a reassignment therapy," she said, including hormone therapy and gender-confirmation surgery.

She returned home after three years, but "neither my parents nor neighbors could accept me and forced me to leave the village."

Ranjitha said she now identifies as a transgender woman, and "I am proud of what I am." She has a government identity card and enjoys social acceptance thanks to the Fatima nuns.

The identity card became possible for transgender people after the Indian Supreme Court in 2014 gave them legal status and protection. They can now work in government jobs while identifying as a third gender.

Ranjitha said her greatest social acceptance came during the 2021 Maundy Thursday celebration, when a parish in Bengaluru washed her feet at the intervention of the Fatima nuns.

"My eyes filled with tears as the priest washed my feet," she said, getting emotional. "I could not control my emotions in the church."

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The Fatima nuns' mission has won praise from people such as Claretian Fr. George Kannanthanam, a social worker in Bengaluru, who wants more congregations to get involved in the mission.

"It is sad that even the Catholic Church ostracizes them as it lacks clarity about their place in the church," said the priest, who organized a Christmas carol service for the transgender community last Christmas.

"When we go to them, they accept us, but when they come to us, do we really accept them?" he asked.

He said Bengaluru is known as the Vatican of the East, as it houses almost all religious congregations in India.

"Why are only the Fatima sisters working among transgender people? Why don't other congregations come forward?" he asked.

Meanwhile, the Indian Christian Women's Movement, an ecumenical forum, decided in early October to admit transgender women as members, which Joseph said is a good sign.

She said the pope's call for giving space for the LGBT community has to be taken up as a challenge to change people's mindset.

"Instead of judging them, let us give them space," she said.