News
Q&As



Teresian Sr. Mary Lou Aldape shows off her stuffed animals in the library at Sacred Heart Catholic School in Uvalde, Texas, in August 2022. (OSV News/Courtesy of Catholic Extension/Juan Guajardo)



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As media outlets broke in with news of another elementary school mass shooting in Nashville on March 27, one sister in particular paid close attention to the shocking events.

Sr. Mary Lou Aldape, a member of the Teresian Sisters since 1971, was on her third assignment in Uvalde, Texas, when she got the word. She knows firsthand how that kind of trauma can affect young students, especially after working with survivors of the May 2022 Robb Elementary School mass shooting. The sister is part of a team of educators and counselors at Sacred Heart School in Uvalde trying to help those students heal from their emotional wounds.

A part-time librarian and technology coordinator, Aldape requested one more assignment this school year — fifth grade religion teacher. This was something she wanted because in that class were former Robb Elementary fourth graders who endured more than an hour trapped with a gunman who killed 19 classmates and two teachers.

"Our witness of our faith and strength in Jesus is something important ... and I think that our faith is for them to know that we are there for them," Aldape said.

Along with Aldape, Catholic organizations and other nonprofits came together to help Uvalde students heal. The Archdiocese of San Antonio, Catholic Charities, and the Children's Bereavement Center provided counselors. Catholic Extension funded mental health services and scholarships so students from Robb could attend Sacred Heart. In the summer of 2022, Catholic Extension supported Camp I-CAN founded by Teresian Sr. Dolores Aviles as a way to help Robb survivors have fun and transition to the upcoming school year.

As she taught, Aldape noticed changes in the children as they responded to these efforts, including on a day in January that the school went into lockdown. She spoke to Global Sisters Report about her mission and the work of those around her. Her responses have been edited for length and clarity.



Teresian Sr. Mary Lou Aldape with students of her robotics club at Sacred Heart Catholic School in Uvalde, Texas (Courtesy of Mary Lou Aldape)

***GSR*: Tell me about the work you're doing with the children at Sacred Heart.**

Aldape: I, personally, am not a counselor. I teach religion. In situations where it's noticeable that students need counseling, we coordinate with them. The counselors are helping us understand where they are.

We have noticed that some children have felt like somebody is watching them. There is an inner fear at times, and on a day we had to have a lockdown, our students from Robb automatically went back to that day. They were once again in shock and in fear. Tremendous fear. So for them, it's easily a moment where they have like a flashback.

When you had that lockdown, what happened?

I understand this man was traveling through Uvalde, and he apparently went to the church first and started saying he was there to kill the demons. Someone reported it immediately to the school office, so we took action because he didn't look well or stable, and so we had to go into lockdown. The police department responded very quickly. It was very well organized, and the children knew exactly what to do, even our little ones, and they were so good, so good.

When the shooting at Nashville happened, what were your thoughts?

Well, the first thing that comes to my mind is how hard it is to really do something that will be proactive to help people that are in such disarray that they consider violence the answer to their problem.

The young man that took the lives of our children, from what we've heard, had issues. And how can we begin preventing such outrage? It just makes me realize that mental health services are just not there. We're not providing for people to get the right service they need. And then, of course, it's a pain that no one can understand, what our families are going through. And how can we stop the use of military weapons in a household? When are we going to make that go away?

I was reading that the shooter in Nashville had seven firearms. What do we need seven firearms for? Why does any civilian need a military weapon? I hope our country will do something about preventing the use of military weapons as a household thing. How many lives will it take for us to say enough is enough?

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How else are you involved with the children to help them get through these times that we're living in right now?

We have had wonderful support, and a lot has to do with the funding we have received through Catholic Extension. We do have our full-time counselor. We also have the Bereavement Center that sends counselors. Of course, our religion classes help them tremendously. We have noticed that the children are beginning to be able to be more present to their academic endeavors. In the beginning, it was very hard for us to have expectations from them academically because they were physically there, but you could see that their mind was with what they were going through.

Can you tell me some specifics about things you do in your work that affect the children?

I began to realize that as a teacher, I can be very demanding, and anything that's stressful for them really sets them back tremendously. They freeze under stress, which is normal. Children will do that, but in their case, it's more prominent.

So every child might have a different situation and a different need, and I think all of us as teachers have to work to maintain our level of stress and try to understand the needs of the children in a way that will help them.

And how do you help them relax? You mentioned that you were very demanding. Did you change the way you taught?

Yes, definitely. I've always done a lot of activities, but we certainly try to make the activities more enjoyable, more ways of playing, to be able to learn the activity through entertaining. It's not so important that they learn something on Tuesday as long as by a certain time, they're going to acquire that. There's not so much focus on the grade, per se, but on the mastering of the skill with time.



Teresian Sr. Mary Lou Aldape with students of her robotics club at Sacred Heart Catholic School in Uvalde, Texas (Courtesy of Mary Lou Aldape)

What are some activities that you do in class that you found really helpful to them?

We often begin the class with some time of silence and for them to think about how they are that day. I ask them to have a journal, and they begin their religion class with sharing with God how their day has been. What are their hopes for the day?

It's interesting that many of them will say, "Well, I wasn't thinking about it. I don't know." So I help them through that. "Did something happen this morning? Tell Jesus about it, and share that with Jesus. What do you think Jesus would tell you about this situation?"

That sense of being able to depend on God and to know that God is always with us is a great strength. Most of the children that were at Robb, when they have been asked, "Are you enjoying your time here? What is it that you like the most?" It's amazing how many of them have said, "Well, we can talk about God. Jesus is here, and we can learn about God." So I think that's very important.



Teresian Sr. Mary Lou Aldape with students of her robotics club at Sacred Heart Catholic School in Uvalde, Texas (Courtesy of Mary Lou Aldape)

Did they say they're not allowed to talk about God at the public school?

I didn't say they're not allowed to, but it just doesn't happen. I mean, they don't have a religion class. They don't open the day with prayer or anything like that, and they also get to go to Mass on Fridays, which is something that they would not do

during school time [at a public school].

What else have you noticed as you work with the children, especially those from Robb?

The one thing that I've noticed right now is that I can see that they're returning to a more normal behavior for a typical 10- or 11-year-old. Many of them were still in shock. Most of them are happy to be in our school. Many of them have said that they don't experience the bullying that they used to experience. There is a sense they need to respect each other more.

What do you do at Sacred Heart to prevent that bullying?

Well, it's going to sound too simple, but if we are there with a Christian attitude, which is the center of our school — Christ is — bullying becomes more than that. It's just not the Christian thing to do, and it's not just because we have a handbook and there's a punishment. It's more because this is whose example we're supposed to follow. So if we are Christians, why would we be constantly fighting with someone else?

Yes, we do have discipline issues. Yes, we do have children that pick on each other sometimes. But at the same time, I think there's less of that attitude of, "I have to take vengeance on this." There's more of, "I have to understand why we're doing this. How can we help each other to be more Christian and more of a better follower of Christ?"

You said it was important to be proactive. What are some things that we as society need to do to, like you said, identify people who could be potential instigators of violence?

I was thinking more of the fact that mental health services are usually very expensive. I wish that we had a medical service that is basically free.

When I think of proactiveness, we need mental health services. Well, now we do have them; it's there because of Robb. But why not do that before and save lives? Why do we have to wait for tragedy to bring what could have prevented it?

What role has your faith played in this mission?

I am blessed with a very positive image of my God. Unfortunately, sometimes people see different things that happen as a test from God. I never have felt that God is ever testing me. How could a merciful parent ever test their children? These events happen because of the struggles, the pain that families go through and don't know how to deal with it.

I know that every individual has free will to choose what they want to do in their life, and my faith gives me the grace to help heal those actions that take place because of the sin that has cost so much pain. And can we embrace even the person that caused the death of our loved ones?

I pray for all the families and for the families of Salvador [Ramos, the Uvalde shooter]. I pray for Salvador. I pray that someday, we will all be reunited and reconciled through the mercy of God. But suffering is not God's test. Suffering is part of our human failures, and God is there to help us through it.