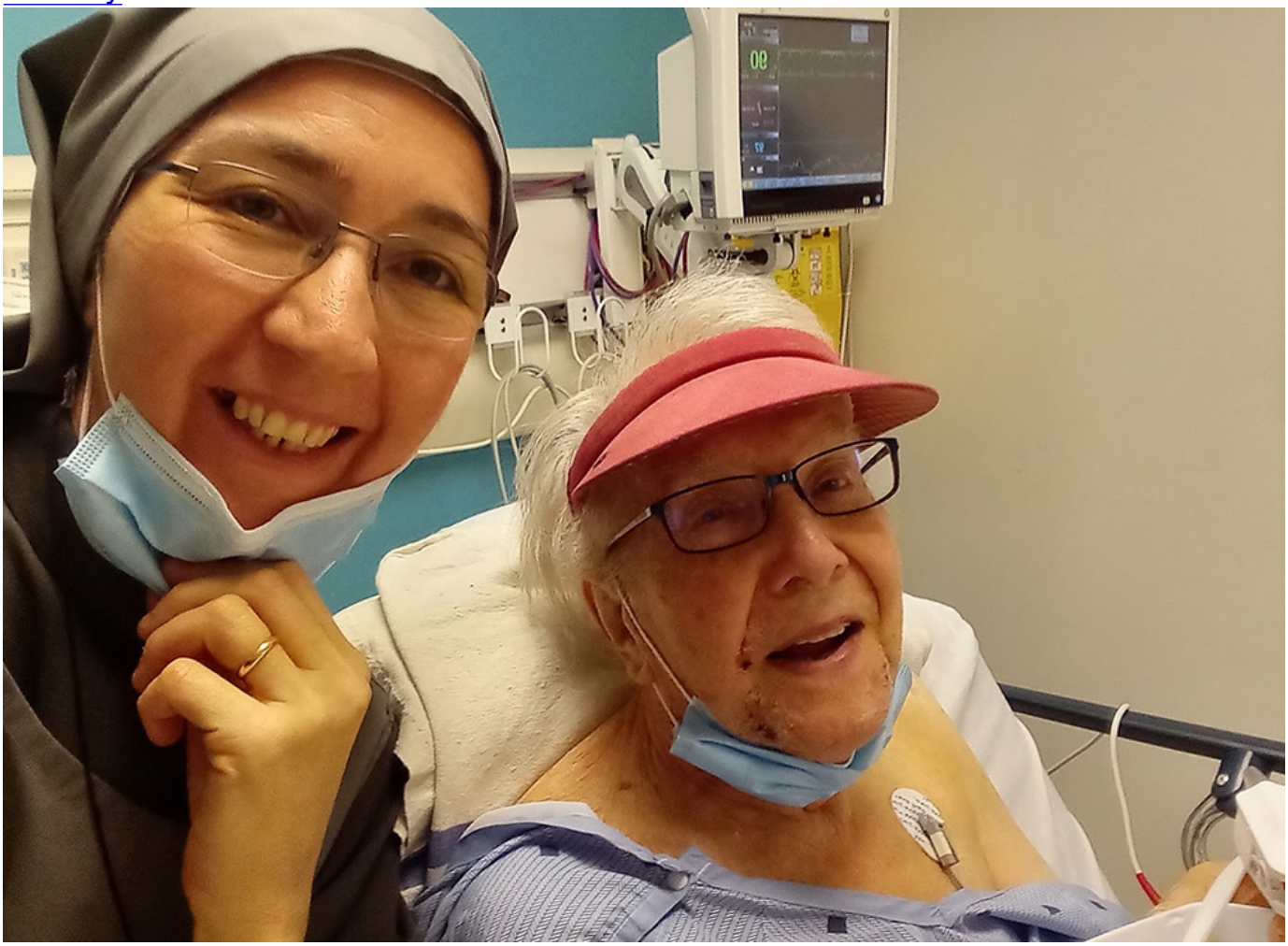
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Mater Dei Sr. Natalia Vazquez visits Fr. Gérald Quintal at the Jewish General Hospital in Montreal in November 2023. (Courtesy of Natalia Vazquez)



by Joanna Kozakiewicz

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In January 2023, Sr. Natalia Vazquez made a poster to gather volunteers to help her with her project of accompaniment for retired, ill and senior priests in the Montreal Archdiocese. However, she did not expect 40 people to sign up right away.

"I thought that maybe seven or eight people would sign up to start with. When I began to explore this territory, I saw that God was calling each volunteer to be part of this mission as well," Vazquez told Global Sisters Report.

Originally from Argentina, Vazquez was assigned in July 2012 to the Diocese of Saint-Jérôme, Canada, by her superiors in the Mater Dei congregation. The congregation's primary focus is to live a life of prayer, faith and education for young people and adults.

However, Vazquez felt called in a new direction. With special permission from her mother superior and the archbishop of Montreal, since July 2023, she has served ad experimentum, or temporarily, as a Missionary of Bethany, in a new charism that allows her "to support the person of the priest, in his human and spiritual needs," she said.

The goal of Vazquez's ministry is to accompany priests from the Montreal Archdiocese so that they can live their vocation fully and flourish in the service of Christ and the church.

Between 2013 and 2018, Vazquez acquired experience working as a coordinator and pastoral agent for St. Peter Parish in the Saint-Jérôme Diocese. Between 2016 and 2020, she was in charge of pastoral care for the elderly and extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, as well as leading spiritual renewal pilgrimages for the Pastoral Unity in Saint-Jérôme. The Pastoral Unity is composed of the parishes of St. Peter, St. Anthony and St. Jerome.



Mater Dei Sr. Natalia Vazquez at the offices of the Montreal Archdiocese (Joanna Kozakiewicz)

In 2017, she obtained the title of professor of sacred sciences from the Mater Dei Institute, philosophy and theology training specific to the community that must be undertaken by every sister who joins. In 2021, she obtained a master's in theology of pastoral care from the Montreal Institute for Theological Education.

Her vision for pastoral care of diocesan priests in Quebec was her focus at the end of her master's.

"When I did my master's degree on this topic, I observed that if the priest is discouraged, there's a direct impact on his ministry," Vazquez said. "But if he's doing well, he is fraternizing with other priests and he attends spiritual retreats, he's much happier and in better shape for his homilies and confessions. He's going to be available and close to his people. I feel a call to help priests so that their community can benefit as well."

Vazquez further explained how human and spiritual needs of the priests are intertwined. To neglect one or the other has a direct impact on the priests' ministry, which the sister observed when writing her final dissertation.

She added that a simple friendly visit to the priest can have an impact on his spiritual health and that there is a big need for accompaniment. Many priests are alone, without families and suffer in silence, especially when they become ill, but Vazquez's ministry encourages them in their pastoral walk.

That suffering in silence was even more apparent for Vazquez during the COVID-19 pandemic. Vazquez, along with another sister of the Mater Dei community, lived in the De La Salle Residence in Sainte-Dorothée (Brothers of the Christian Schools) for 50 days to accompany brothers and priests there who had COVID-19. For Vaquez, this was an unforgettable experience, which undoubtedly marked her vocation.

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The ministry officially began part-time, three days a week, in December 2022, working with retired and senior priests. The project was successful and Vazquez began to work full-time in September 2023 as coordinator for the human and spiritual accompaniment of priests in the Montreal Archdiocese.

On Oct. 31, 2023, the director of the Office for Pastoral Personnel in the Montreal Archdiocese, Fr. François Charette, officially announced Vazquez's new ministry as "coordinator for the human and spiritual accompaniment of priests." On the same day, two YouTube videos in French and Spanish on the archdiocese's channel announced her initiative.

"We are now the diocese with the most priests in Canada," Charette told GSR. "Many of them are fragile and elderly. Some live in residences for the elderly, but some live in private apartments.

"I quickly realized that it would be practically impossible to know everyone's situation and to truly care for them because there are so many of them. What Sister Natalia brings is this personal attention to each, especially those who have more specific needs due to illness or old age," he said.

According to Vazquez, the diocese has nearly 800 priests in total, out of which around 150 are retired or sick.

The sister develops various initiatives in favor of the well-being of priests. She works in collaboration with Charette, a group of 40 volunteers, and the priests themselves to organize healing retreats, training activities, leisure time and fraternity among priests.



Mater Dei Sr. Natalia Vazquez joins senior priests during lunchtime at the Angus residence in Montreal. (Courtesy of Natalia Vazquez)

She often visits a private senior residence called Angus, where nuns, priests and laypeople reside. She makes sure priests are visited when hospitalized and that priests have a cross at their bedside and can partake in Communion.

Vazquez's ministry is personalized, focusing on a priest's individual needs. She says that it represents the maternal aspect of the church.

"My vocation is to support the person of the priest, rather than the priest's ministry," Vazquez said. "There are religious communities that are dedicated to supporting the priest in his ministry, for example taking care of catechesis or the choir. However, I

take care of the individual."

In November 2023, Vazquez took care of Fr. Gérald Quintal, a 91-year-old retired priest who was hospitalized at the Jewish General Hospital. With the sister's help, the priest was looked after when ill and eventually moved from his apartment in downtown Montreal to the Angus residence.

"There isn't much I can do anymore, outside of private visits," Quintal told GSR. "I can't preside over baptisms, marriages or funerals."



Mater Dei Sr. Natalia Vazquez helps Fr. Gérald Quintal move from his apartment to the Angus residence in Montreal. (Courtesy of Natalia Vazquez)

He is grateful for Vazquez's availability for those in need.

"Sister Natalia visits priests here, she was just here yesterday!" he said. "She is a simple person who is always available to serve others.

Fr. Robert Lapointe, who is responsible for the priests at the Angus residence, said that the priests looked forward to Vazquez's visits.

"She's a very happy lady who spreads joy all around her with her cheerfulness and good humor," Lapointe said. "I like her availability, her open-mindedness and her sense of humor."

According to Lapointe, the sister plays an important role in accompanying priests in their most fragile moments, especially at the end of their lives.

"There are priests who are dying here," he said. "The day before yesterday a priest passed away, and Sister Natalia was here, praying at his bedside."

"The church needs that, and more people to visit the priests who are ill," Lapointe added. "When people visit them, it does them good."

Volunteers are a valuable aspect of this ministry, Vazquez explained, adding that priests benefit from a friendly visit in the comfort of their home or when they are hospitalized. Volunteers also help with moving the priests' belongings, cleaning, groceries and accompaniment to medical appointments. Their contributions can vary from celebrating the priest's birthdays to administrative tasks such as taking care of taxes.

Volunteers can be of any age or profession, but they are required to pass a background check and partake in an archdiocesan course to prevent abuse. In some cases, entire families get involved to take care of a priest who is in need.

Montreal Archbishop Christian Lépine recognizes that Vazquez's charism and academic background matched the needs of the priests in the diocese as well as the need for volunteer work. Vazquez's approach, the archbishop said, allows for the entire church to work together in service.



Mater Dei Sr. Natalia Vazquez with two volunteers in front of the De La Salle Residence for seniors in Sainte-Dorothée, Quebec (Sr. Natalia Vazquez)

"Sister Natalia's approach is highly original," Lépine told GSR. "The idea behind Sister Natalia's project is not to wait for someone to say that they need help, but to go forward and ask how things are going, and not to do it alone, but to do it together as a church. It's the entire church that supports its priests and accompanies them."

The archbishop expanded on the idea that we all need one another and that Vazquez's ministry for priests has an ecclesial dimension to it, as it allows attention offered to the members of the church by other members of the church.

"What I find beautiful about this project is the complementarity of vocations, because it's a person from a consecrated life who's called to respond to the need of accompaniment of priests," Lépine said. "But she does this by allowing the church to accompany her, since the volunteers are laypeople or other religious. Her group of volunteers is made of diverse vocations as well."

He added, "Finally, by being in service of accompaniment to the priests, it allows the priests to be in service to other vocations, too. We're here to serve each other. It's what Jesus said in the last scene of washing the feet of his disciples: to do what he did for one another. It's very ecclesial to be at the service of priests."

The archbishop confirmed the need and impact for Vazquez's ministry as priests tend to live longer lives and do not get to retire from being priests. Some live until the age of 80, 90 or even 100 and develop many fragilities.



From left: Montreal Archbishop Christian Lépine, Mater Dei Sr. Natalia Vazquez and Fr. François Charette (Joanna Kozakiewicz)

For priests of senior age to continue to serve, Lépine said, it is important to benefit from the support and accompaniment of others as it "testifies of the love of God that takes care of them."

Vazquez has many goals for the future of her ministry, including having a home dedicated to retired priests.

"I dream of a house where priests can rest and fraternize in a calm place, close to a lake," she said. "I know there are religious communities that receive priests, but sometimes there are no spots available. When it comes to priests from the diocese, this would be a concrete way of supporting them."

Vazquez aims to create a list of retired priests to know exactly where they are and what their needs are. Another goal is to have priests visit other priests to increase fraternity among them.

Moreover, Vazquez dreams of a team of Catholic professionals in psychology and law to help priests with their concrete needs.

"It would be great to set up a team of professionals who could help in a more concrete way, especially in psychology, because there are a lot of priests who suffer from stress. If we can get well-trained Catholic professionals, that would be ideal," Vazquez told GSR.

Finally, Vazquez hopes to inspire more women to join her in her call.

"I wish other young women who have this calling to religious life and to help priests would join me," she said.