News
Q&As



Congregation of the Mother of Carmel Sr. Noel Rose is pictured with a 12-member contingent of the National Service Scheme at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in New Delhi, India. (Courtesy of Sr. Noel Rose)



by Jessy Joseph

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Sr. Noel Rose is the first Catholic nun to attend India's Republic Day parade in New Delhi as an official.

The 51-year-old member of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel led a 12-member contingent of the National Service Scheme, or NSS, from the southwestern Indian state of Kerala at the Jan. 26 celebrations.

The project is a federal government program for instilling the spirit of community service in high school and college students. Rose was chosen for the job from a pool of more than 3,000 National Service Scheme officers in Kerala and neighboring Lakshadweep Island.

The nun, with a doctorate in women and spirituality, coordinates the program for Kerala's Idukki district. She is also a professor of Malayalam language at Newman College, Thodupuzha, the Idukki district headquarters.

Rose spoke to Global Sisters Report in New Delhi after the Republic Day parade.



Congregation of the Mother of Carmel Sr. Noel Rose is pictured on Kartavya Path, a ceremonial boulevard in New Delhi, where the Republic Day Parade takes place on Jan. 26 every year. (Courtesy of Sr. Noel Rose)

GSR: How do you feel after becoming the first Catholic nun to lead the National Service Scheme volunteers in the Republic Day parade?

Rose: I am happy to become part of history. I was not permitted to march with my team as the program officials were not permitted to do so. But I could take immense pride in training my team and then watching them march at the parade. My desire to witness the Republic Day parade in New Delhi was also fulfilled. I believe God made my long-forgotten wish alive after years.

What is the National Service Scheme? What is its aim?

It is [a] program under the federal Ministry of Youth Affairs to help high school and college students get involved in society.

The program aims to make education relevant to current societal needs and transform students into responsible citizens through community service. It bridges the gap between students and social realities. It encourages students to plan and implement development projects and help the poor and socially disadvantaged groups.

It develops young people's leadership skills and encourages them to maintain community assets. It promotes the dignity of labor, self-reliance, and the integration of physical work with intellectual growth. It fosters unity through teamwork. Its activities are designed to instill discipline, build character, enhance physical fitness and cultivate cultural awareness.

As a teacher and the program coordinator, I ensure my students diligently adhere to these principles and objectives.



Congregation of the Mother of Carmel Sr. Noel Rose instructs National Service Scheme students during a parade training at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in New Delhi. (Courtesy of Sr. Noel Rose)

Were you a volunteer as a student?

No, I was not aware of such a project when I was a student. I was appointed an assistant professor at Nirmala College in Muvattupuzha in 2008. Two years later, the college appointed me as an official for its NSS program, alongside my teaching. In 2022, I was transferred to Newman College in Thodupuzha, where I continued as a professor and program official.

As a program official, I had to attend several training programs. Only then did I truly understand how the program shapes the future of young people and, through them, the country.

Why did the college appoint you as a program official?

The college selects teachers, but only a few show interest in this challenging job. I said yes because the job helps me participate in students' activities outside class and encourage their potential.

The coordinator's term is for three years, but the college and the university extended my tenure. I am now in my fifth year. The university honored me with the Best Program Coordinator award in 2022. I received the same award again two years later.



Congregation of the Mother of Carmel Sr. Noel Rose is pictured at the dress rehearsal for the Republic Day Parade on Kartavya Path, a ceremonial boulevard in New Delhi, where the Republic Day Parade takes place on Jan. 26 every year. (Courtesy of Sr. Noel Rose)

How do you balance your religious commitment, teaching job and official role?

It was challenging to take up this role while teaching full-time. The officials have to organize various activities for the volunteers, such as cleaning public places, creating gardens in schools, and organizing blood donation camps or health awareness classes. It demands time, passion and dedication. It is especially difficult for female staff. I find joy in this role. I have not taken any leave after becoming an official. I work with around 300 students.

What else have you done?

I have authored 17 books, all inspired by the Bible and focused on empowering women. My community has been incredibly supportive to me. None of this would have been possible without the unwavering support of my superiors and sisters.

Why did you become a nun?

I was in the ninth grade when I read the biography of St. Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception, India's first female saint. Her life inspired me deeply. As the youngest of four siblings, my family initially opposed my decision. But they finally relented as I stood firm in my decision after completing the 12th grade.



Congregation of the Mother of Carmel Sr. Noel Rose (with shawl and gift), is pictured with her provincial superior Sr. Maria Anto (right of Rose) and her community members at the reception held at the Mother Carmel Provincial House in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. (Courtesy of Sr. Noel Rose)

You also directed short films? What inspired you to do so?

I was the scriptwriter and director for two documentary films, "The Nun" and "U Turn." I wanted to share the truth about sisters. People used to ask me why I had become a sister. Some wanted to know if I [was] truly happy in the convent. Others suspected that I became a sister after a love failure. People don't really understand the religious life. They only see the surface, not the depth and meaning of our mission. I used the documentaries to talk about our work, dedication and the impact we have [on] society. I had to visit many mission stations across India for this project. I was supported by the "Good News Channel," [a charismatic television program in Kerala].

You have also built houses for the poor. What prompted you to do so?

It was part of my NSS job. During one of our social engagements, we came across a homeless family. We informed Mahatma Gandhi University about it and approached the K. Chittilappilly Foundation, a philanthropic organization in Kerala. The foundation granted 400,000 rupees [about $4,600] for the house, disbursed in eight installments. A few more homeless people approached me, and I submitted their proposals to the foundation after verifying they were genuine.

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To build even a modest house, 400,000 rupees is not sufficient. So, the NSS volunteers raised additional funds and volunteered as laborers. Their dedication made the project a remarkable success. For me, it was my most challenging task. Some had discouraged [me] from taking it, but God blessed me through many people.

Do you think such works change the perception of Catholic nuns?

Yes, they do. Traditionally, nuns are seen as people who spend time praying or doing parish work. My role as the NSS coordinator has challenged the notion. Such jobs help sisters show their leadership, dedication, and ability to engage deeply with real-world issues. They help people see nuns as those involved in social realities.

What is your advice to the younger generation?

My advice is simple: cultivate the habit of reading. It can change lives and offer deeper insights and self-awareness for a brighter future. It's crucial to guide young people. It is not easy to support them in becoming responsible individuals. But perseverance and commitment will succeed.