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Ministry



Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Sr. Maria Rosa (far left) is pictured with her Indian colleagues (left to right) Srs. Sagaya Rani, Marneni Jayamma and Sindhuja before serving lunch to the residents of Sumanahalli in Bengaluru, southern India. (Thomas Scaria)



by Thomas Scaria

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Leprosy patients and the Catholic nuns who serve them in southern India are upset that a Spanish missionary had to leave the country after her visa was not renewed. Catholic nuns are experiencing increasing hostility and struggling to perform their ministries and continue serving the local population.

"We are sad that our mentor and spiritual guide has to leave the country," said Sr. Marneni Jayamma, superior of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate congregation's convent in the Sumanahalli facilities, where Sr. Maria Rosa lived and served as a formator and trainer for the Franciscan nuns and a missionary among people living with leprosy in India.

Rosa returned to Spain on May 15, two days after celebrating the golden jubilee of her congregation's presence in India. Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Susainathan of Bangalore celebrated the jubilee Mass with Rosa and almost 80 Franciscan nuns and sisters from other congregations.



Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Sr. Maria Rosa giving a woolen blanket to a resident of Sumanahalli in Bengaluru, southern India (Thomas Scaria)

"We are sad she is going back, but the congregation is proud that she has [built] a strong foundation in India," said Jayamma, the administrator of Sumanahalli.

"I return to my country now, but my sisters will continue to serve leprosy patients, perhaps more effectively than I did," Rosa said during the celebrations.

Speaking to Global Sisters Report at Sumanahalli, the 77-year-old nun said she enjoyed the time she spent with leprosy patients and her Indian nuns. As she dressed the wounds of a leprosy patient known only as Balakrishna, Rosa said her daily routine starts with "this act of love."

"God's love, if not shared, is a tragedy. I will keep walking, serving and giving as long as [my] health allows. For life was given to us, and we deserve it by giving it away," said a cheerful Rosa.

Balakrishna, a Hindu in his 50s living in the Sumanahalli facilities, said he was sad that Rosa had to leave India. "But I hope she will come back to touch and heal us," he told GSR.

He said that more than the medical treatment, Rosa's mental healing and spiritual "vibes" touched him. "Each time she dressed my wounds, I felt much consoled, accepted and loved," he added.



Residents of Sumanahalli, Bengaluru, southern India, assemble for their lunch at the dining hall as the nuns prepare to serve them. (Thomas Scaria)

Palaniyamma, a resident of Sumanahalli, said Rosa's presence always made her happy. Muniyamma, another resident, posed with Rosa for a photograph and said the Spanish nun was like a family member. "We could not accept her leaving us. She was just one of us," she said with tears.

Rosa first served in India from 1990 to 2006 as a health worker, formator and provincial delegate.

"I was asked to promote vocations and form new members to continue our mission in India. It was like the two sides of the coin, and I enjoyed both the roles," Rosa told GSR.

She also provided training to treat leprosy patients. She then served in Kenya from 2006 to 2017, where she developed a Franciscan community. During this period, she visited India periodically to motivate her Indian sisters involved in leprosy programs.

She formally returned to India in 2022.



Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Sr. Maria Rosa with a team of members of her congregation that she recruited and trained in Kenya. (Courtesy of Sr. Maria Rosa)

Rosa was born in 1947 in Ibiza, Spain, and joined the Franciscan nuns at the age of 20. From 1970, she worked in education for the deaf and nonverbal. Later, she completed an international diploma in leprosy and auxiliary surgery.

Sr. Sagaya Rani, a member of Rosa's congregation who celebrated her silver jubilee on May 13, said her Spanish companion was their "living role model."

"Her greatest achievement in India was recruiting and training sisters," said the nun who now heads the therapy team in Sumanahalli, adding that Rosa trained the majority of its 86 Indian members.

One of them, Sr. Christina Fernandes, said her vocation, formation and health training was "a journey of love, faith and discipline" at Rosa's side.

"[Her] gentle firmness, profound faith and unwavering commitment to religious life shaped my spiritual journey and work among the leprosy patients. Her life was a beautiful testimony of love in action," she told GSR over the phone on May 31. She said her congregation will miss Rosa.

Sr. Maria Sinduja, a therapist at Sumanahalli, said Rosa took her to villages, slums and busy streets to identify people with leprosy and care for them. "It was hard, but she taught us to enjoy it."



Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Sr. Maria Rosa poses with Franciscan nuns in Sumanahalli, Bengaluru, after receiving the "Sumanahalli Dr. Hansen's Award 2025" on Jan. 30, World Leprosy Day. (Courtesy of Fr. George Kannanthanam)

Sumanhalli honored Rosa with the Sumanahalli Dr. Hansen's Award 2025 on Jan. 30, World Leprosy Day.

"Your life has become a beacon of life to the leprosy-affected persons, very specially for those in Sumanahalli," read the award citation.

Sumanahalli's director, Claretian Fr. George Kannanthanam, said Rosa and the Franciscan nuns have played "a remarkable role" in shaping the center as a "happy place" for leprosy patients and their families.

"Because of your formation, we now have a group of sisters who bring new life to leprosy-affected [people]," he told Rosa. He also described her mission among leprosy patients in Africa as remarkable.

Fernandes credited Rosa with playing a key role in developing India's campaign against leprosy. "This award is a reflection of such recognition," she added.

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Rosa said she dedicated the award to her congregation and her sisters in India who have been involved in the prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of the leprosy-affected population in India for 50 years.

"I personally became part of thousands of leprosy patients and their families. I am sure they, too, enjoyed the felicitation and recognition," she added.

Rosa said her Franciscan identity makes her humble, and "my burning passion made me a global missionary."

She said she joined the lives of leprosy patients, those who are blind, deaf and nonverbal, and the destitute as her brothers and sisters in this ministry. "I enjoyed every bit of being with them in my journey," she said.