



Sr. Shila Teresa Gomes of Bangladesh, second from left, and another member of the Catechist Sisters of the Immaculate Conception celebrate with Sisters of St. Francis de Sales in Florence, Italy. (Courtesy of Shila Teresa Gomes)



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When Italian missionaries traveled to Bangladesh decades ago, they came to share the Gospel and serve local communities. Today, a Bangladeshi Catholic sister is making the journey in the opposite direction.

Sr. Shila Teresa Gomes, 50, a member of the Catechist Sisters of the Immaculate Conception — commonly known as the Shanti Rani Sisters — has spent the past 16 years in Italy caring for elderly members of the Sisters of St. Francis de Sales, many of whom are in their 90s and older.

"Once, Italian missionaries came to serve Bangladesh. Now, we have come to Italy to serve," Gomes told Global Sisters Report during a recent visit to Bangladesh.

Her ministry reflects a quiet but significant reversal of missionary history. As many religious congregations in Europe face declining vocations and aging membership, sisters from countries such as Bangladesh are increasingly helping care for elderly religious women who dedicated their lives to mission work around the world.

Gomes currently lives in Florence, where she serves three elderly Italian sisters, ages 92 to 102. When she first arrived in 2010, the convent was home to 13 elderly sisters.

"One by one they passed away," she said. "The last sister who died was 103 years old."

Today, she and two other sisters provide around-the-clock accompaniment and care, helping the women live their final years with dignity.

Her congregation expanded its presence in Italy on Nov. 17, 2025, opening a new community in San Miniato, near Florence, dedicated to elderly care.

The relationship between the Shanti Rani Sisters and Italy dates back several decades. According to Gomes, two sisters from the congregation first traveled to Italy in 1989 to pursue nursing studies. Through contacts with elderly religious communities, the congregation gradually became involved in caregiving ministries and has continued that service since.

A trained nurse who studied at Rajshahi Medical College, Gomes was assigned to Italy on Jan. 3, 2010.

"I was young and didn't know Italian," she said. "When I arrived, I saw so many elderly sisters and wondered how I would manage. But they welcomed me with such love."

She compared her reception to that of a newborn welcomed into a family.

"They accepted me sincerely and with great joy," she said. "I still receive that love today."

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Much of her work involves nursing care. The convent is equipped with oxygen supplies, a nebulizer and medical monitoring equipment, allowing many treatments to be carried out at home.

"We do everything we can for them," Gomes said. "Only when necessary do we take them to the hospital."

Beyond medical care, she says, the ministry is rooted in presence and companionship.

"Many elderly Italians come to talk to me," she said. "Some have no one to listen to them. I become part of their lives by listening to their joys and sorrows. They find peace and comfort through those conversations."

Life in Italy has not been without challenges.

Learning a new language was difficult, particularly during her early years. Gomes said she also encountered prejudice related to her skin color.

"Sometimes children would ask why I was black or whether I used soap," she said. "Some adults also made comments. Those experiences were painful."

Yet she says the kindness she has received far outweighs the difficulties.

"The people of Italy are very sincere," she said. "If we don't understand something, they come forward to help. People are cooperative and supportive."

Gomes believes that small acts of patience and kindness are themselves a form of evangelization.

"First of all, I present myself as a religious sister," she said. "Sometimes people may judge us because of our appearance, but we try to witness through our behavior."

She described simple moments — giving way to someone in a queue, greeting strangers warmly, caring gently for patients — as opportunities to share her faith.

"With these small acts and a smiling face, we try to bear witness to who we are," she said.

The ministry also creates benefits for her congregation back home. Income earned through overseas service helps support the congregation's mission in Bangladesh, where resources are more limited.

"We are serving in Italy, but our congregation also benefits," Gomes said. "The support we send home helps our congregation become more self-sufficient. I am happy that I can contribute in that way."

According to Gomes, about 35 Bangladeshi sisters from various congregations are living in Italy, some serving in ministry and others pursuing studies. She believes more Bangladeshi priests and religious could serve there in the future, particularly as some parishes face clergy shortages.

After nearly three decades of religious life, Gomes remains deeply grateful for her vocation.

"I don't know how to thank God for my calling," she said. "God has given me the opportunity to represent my small country in another land. Sometimes tears come to my eyes when I think about it."