News
Religious Life



Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace participate in a June 22, 2019, Jubilee liturgy at the St. Mary-on-the-Lake Chapel in Bellevue, Wash. Care for retired religious takes special emphasis amid the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/courtesy Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace)



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The retired Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace might not be able to escape the news of the coronavirus' deadly impact on nursing homes just a few miles away from them, but they have a way to cope with it.

"A lot of them have the practice of praying the news and that is definitely happening now," said Sr. Susan Francois, one of the order's assistant congregation leaders.

When the coronavirus first hit King County, just outside Seattle, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace stepped up their care for the retired sisters living in a residence in that same county at the order's home, St. Mary of the Lake in Bellevue, Washington.

In early March, they closed their Peace and Spirituality Center, which was open to the public. They have also asked no one to visit, at this home and where the retired sisters live at the order's congregation headquarters in Englewood, New Jersey.

Now, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace are focused on providing for employees and looking into catastrophic leave policy if employees had to be out of work for a long

period. "We are trying to apply Catholic values to the situation in caring for the sisters and the staff," Francois told Catholic News Service March 13.

The order also is working on community gatherings through virtual assemblies and creating materials for sisters to use.

Francois said she is not particularly concerned about the impact of isolation on the sisters amid the current pandemic, because as she put it: "the beauty of social isolation in religious life is you are not alone in a community."

She also said the more aged sisters — the median age of the order is 80 — are "on mission every day, even those infirmed are praying for the needs of the world."

Francois, 47, is not panicked, but she does worry about the older sisters who have devoted themselves to God and others. "They have a lot to give in the ministry of prayer and we want to keep that powerhouse of prayer open," she added.

That feeling has been echoed by other congregation leaders as they try to keep their elderly sisters in good health, so cognizant of the good work they have done and continue to do in their ministry of prayer.

Mercy Sister Kathleen Ann Kolb, coordinator of health and wellness for Sisters of Mercy sisters in the New York and Pennsylvania area, said the leadership team members have been meeting a lot and ensuring that the homes where they care for retired sisters are disinfected and are barring visitors.

The sisters are "trying to be as creative as possible and use technology as much as possible" while following best practices for care, she said. She also emphasized that they are trying to help the sisters, "who are our prayer house," to still have choices that are safe.



Sister Cabrini Delaney consults with a member of the dietary staff at the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace's Englewood Cliff, N.J., facility, in this October 2016 photo. Care for retired religious takes special emphasis amid the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/courtesy Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace)

A key concern for all in the order, including the elderly, is for the staff members, she said.

The sisters, of all ages, do not have a lot of anxiety at the moment. "They are used to responding to emergencies and taking care of people," she said.

Sr. Carol Zinn, a Sister of St. Joseph from Chestnut Hill in Philadelphia, who is executive director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, said women religious are fully aware of the "reservoir of contemplative energy" of their older sisters, a phrase she said she did not come up with.

"Our senior sisters are beloved and so important to us," she said, emphasizing that congregations' leadership teams have been putting very strict protocols in place to care for their aging sisters who are part of a vulnerable population now with the coronavirus.

"We are circling a loving wagon around our senior population," she said, adding that in her congregation of Sisters of St. Joseph, hold their senior sisters "so dear" and will "do whatever we have to protect them."

She also said, as did others, that the sisters as a whole are not panicking but "moving with God's grace" and that the older sisters are praying for everyone but themselves. And they are primarily concerned about the workers in their facilities, especially those with young children now at home with schools canceled. It is clear they are grateful for the care they are receiving, she added, and very mindful of those not getting the best care.

But care for retired religious at this time is not just for women religious.

Dominican Brother Ignatius Perkins, director of provincial administration for the Dominican Friars-Province of St. Joseph in New York, told CNS in an email that the Dominican friars are "carefully following the published preventative guidelines in all of our communities and ministries."

The brother, who is chair of the School of Nursing at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky, said that because the elderly friars are more vulnerable, they have been advised to stay home, exercise social distancing, and get more rest and improved nutrition.

Spiritual health also is important though and he said that during this pandemic, it is "important to prevent social isolation" even within religious communities.

It also is a crucial time of outreach to the community at large that will require "creative and pastoral ingenuity to continue to bring the healing message of Jesus through electronic means," he said, stressing the need for phone calls and emails to the homebound in our midst as a sign that "everyone is worthy of our care and no one is forgotten."

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