Columns
Coronavirus
Religious Life



Medical staff wearing protective face masks and suits walk past a tent at Madrid's Gregorio Maranon Hospital April 1, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS / Reuters / Susana Vera)



by Young Sisters

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This letter was written collaboratively by a group of sisters under age 50 following the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States. Living in multigenerational communities, we wanted to express our concern for our sisters who are in the highest risk groups for this illness, some of whom are not heeding advice of the medical community to stay at home and practice social distancing.

Dear Sisters,

Stay at home. Please, stay at home.

We, your younger sisters, plead with you to stay at home while this virus is spreading.

We know that the world around us is in great turmoil, and that our commitment to religious life draws you to respond to immediate needs of the world. Right now, though, we must respond without leaving the house, finding new ways to reach out to those who are distressed. For our sake and that of everyone around you, please stay at home.

This virus is something the medical community doesn't yet understand, but we do know that it is more dangerous for those over age 60 than for younger people. We see your energy and your resistance to the term "elderly" that the news is using so often. But this isn't about how young you feel; it's about how many years your body has lived. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that mortality rates increase dramatically among those over age 60. We are worried about you — please stay at home!

You might answer that young people are also at risk: Indeed, we are, and you might notice we have curtailed our activities, too. But in light of our younger bodies, please allow us to do the necessary errands for the house. Stay at home.

You may say you have many reasons why you need to go out right now for this one thing. None of that is as important as your life and the lives of those around you. We love you and want you to keep sharing your gifts and your heart with the world. Is this one errand or visit really so important that it's worth risking your life or the lives of those you live and work with?

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Of course, our call to religious life demands engagement with the world, and there are things we can do to stay engaged. Although it is difficult, we can minister without being physically present. With so many people under stay-at-home orders, reaching out by phone or online can help someone who feels isolated. Medical personnel under enormous stress would appreciate a note or message of support. The people who are typically unrecognized for their service to the community, such as janitors, delivery drivers and grocery store cashiers, are putting themselves in harm's way for the sake of the community: A small sign of our gratitude is certainly welcome.

We are known as women of prayer — why not offer to pray online or by phone with someone? Perhaps this is the time to experiment with spiritual guidance by phone or videoconference. It is taking all of our creativity and thoughtfulness, but ministry continues even from home.

The thing is, we who are newer to religious life admire and love our sisters. We see the writing on the wall, that we will outlive most of you to the time when congregations are much smaller. We have already had some of our mentors and wise sisters pass away. The grief is real, and our worry for you is genuine. Please, please, stay at home.

And if you won't do it for yourselves or for us, do it for the doctors and nurses who are overwhelmed as resources are stretched thin by this particularly contagious and deadly disease. Think of the families whose loved ones are at risk. This is a time to stay at home for the sake of our world, our country, our city and the most vulnerable among us.

We have professed vows and dedicated our lives to respond to the needs of the world in the here and now. Our obedience calls us to listen to the experts who say we need to slow the spread of this virus by staying home. Our chastity calls us to live in relationships, so that in all we do we consider how our actions affect others: We protect others by slowing the spread of disease, and by our example of staying at home we show others what responsible action looks like. The acute sense of human vulnerability we feel at this moment is an expression of our poverty, a reality we share with all people around the world. Let this real experience of poverty mark us and shape our future in ministry.

Please, just stay at home.

With love and prayer,

Your Sisters