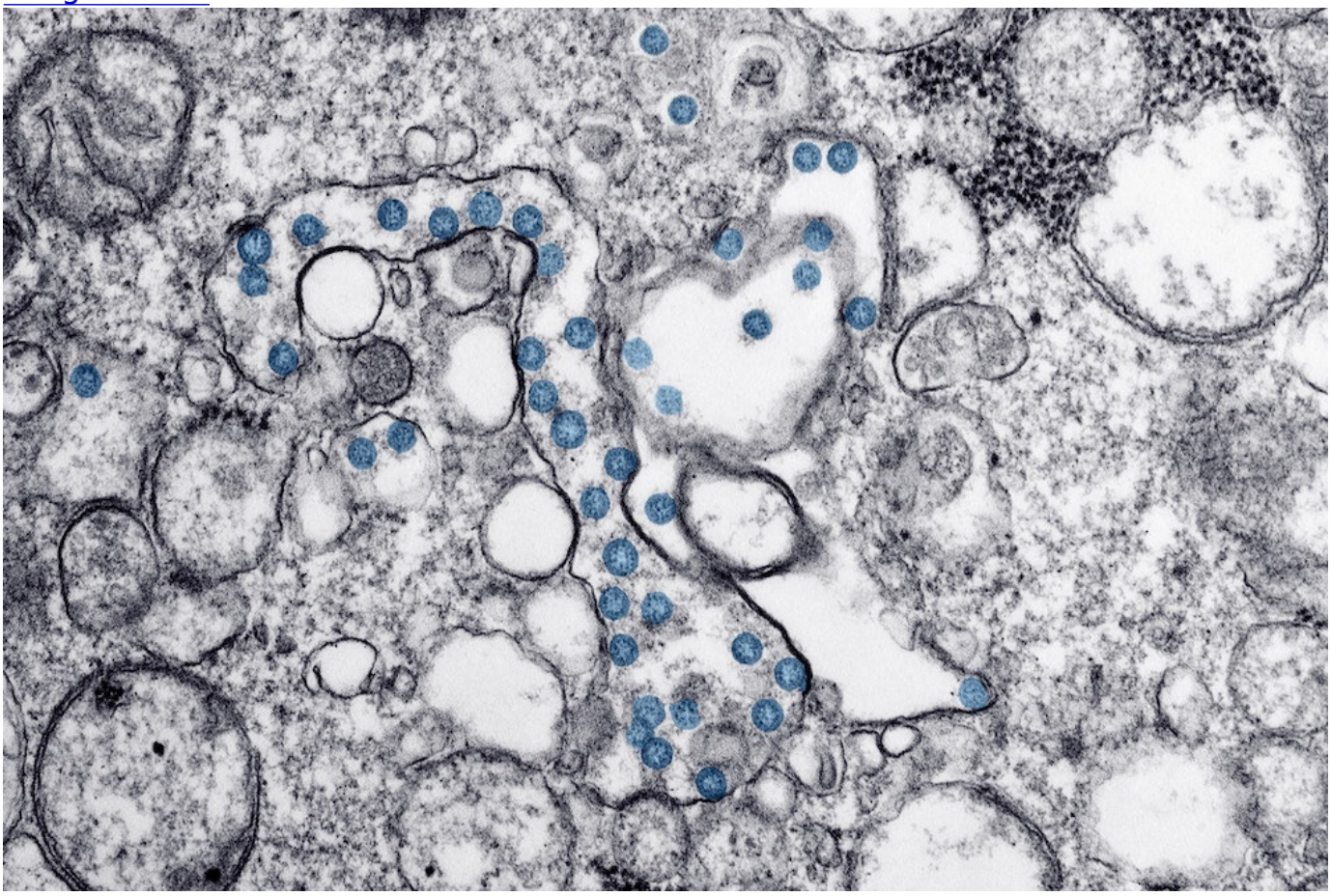
Columns
Coronavirus
Religious Life



Transmission electron microscopic image of an isolate from the first U.S. case of COVID-19, formerly known as 2019-nCoV. The spherical viral particles, colorized blue, contain cross-sections through the viral genome, seen as black dots. (Unsplash/U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)



by Jennibeth Sabay

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June 18, 2020

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My first thoughts when a month-long lockdown was announced in the Philippines starting March 14 were that COVID-19 was nothing serious and only just like a common flu; but as the time passes, I feel its severity.

I was going to an office located in another city, assisting one of my sisters who is the national coordinator of a program called Pastoral Care for Children. She was on vacation during the announcement of the lockdown. Upon hearing about it, I wondered how I could travel to the office, given the situation.

It started first with the suspension of classes, work, and then public transportation and everything else. With no more public transportation, I was forced to bring some work home and stay there.

I had been anticipating the visit of my younger brother, who had an appointment to sign his contract for work abroad. So I would not meet him, since no flight could enter Manila, Philippine's capital, during the lockdown. That was sad.

Watching the news and getting updated on the events happening made me think, "This is getting serious!" But I also had a thought that this would be an opportunity for me to be with my sisters in the community and have more time to relax, rest and pray.

From the beginning, I wondered how it would feel to go days without attending Mass. My day feels incomplete without being able to physically attend Mass. I'm thankful for the technology that allows me to participate in Masses streaming online, though it is more meaningful for me to participate inside the church with the larger community. But our community has a para-liturgy daily in which we receive the Body of Christ, and we have a priest friend who comes on Sundays to celebrate Mass with us in our community.

Here's how I spend my day: Every morning and evening, I join in our common prayers with the community. We do our personal prayer and view online Mass. Then there is our common housework, and I do my office work from home, getting in touch with the leaders in different places where Pastoral Care for Children is present. Because of the lockdown, the basic activities of the program are on hold due to precautionary measures.



To assist with online Mass, Filippino families often construct a small altar with candles and flowers (Jennibeth Sabay)

Since I am the community bursar, I do my accounting work for the community. I join the sisters for meals, we have our siesta, and take time to update ourselves with news on the ongoing pandemic. We continue to have our weekly community meetings, *lectio divina* and holy hour.

I have time to watch a movie with the sisters or read a book, and check Facebook or other social media. I sing and play guitar some evenings or do some handicrafts.

Sometimes I communicate online with my family, friends and some people in our areas of mission just to check to see how they are.

In other words, life goes on in the community even with this lockdown.

Notwithstanding, I feel lonely at times in this lockdown as I am limited especially in moving in or out of the house. We cannot go for mission in areas we used to go, due to the strict implementation of social distancing and the stay-at-home policy, and of course I am not able to go to work either.

Hearing the sad news of fatalities due to COVID-19 and much negativity related to the pandemic, the feeling that I can't control what's happening makes me feel lonely. Sometimes getting drowned with negativity in the media, giving in to negative self-talk in my mind and not being faithful to my prayer time make me feel lonely, too.

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I fight loneliness by doing things that I like to do — playing the guitar and singing the songs close to my heart. I listen to inspiring, uplifting talks or music, sit in silence and meditate.

I think of happy experiences and recall stories about people I love. I connect with people in and out of community, sending inspiring group messages to young people. Above all, it is my heart-to-heart talk, sharing and spending time with God in prayer that soothes my lonely heart.

To avoid the COVID-19 infection, my community follows the precautions advised by the health department:

- We keep ourselves healthy by drinking more water, getting enough rest and sleep, and eating well (more fruits and vegetables).
- We follow the advice to stay at home, do frequent hand washing and keep our house clean.
- We wear a mask when going outside for marketing, strictly following infection control measures.

We didn't stock provisions for 30 days. We go for marketing once a week. Even with lockdown, shops are open where you can buy essential needs. We buy only what is necessary.

Keeping in mind the people who are struggling to have food, we allocated money in our budget to share with people who are in most need in this crisis. During Lent, we agreed to sacrifice our snacks to give a good meal to some of the push-cart street families.

Despite many constraints, I am not afraid at all. I believe that this lockdown is only temporary. This time of crisis is the opportunity for people to put into action what they have gained from going to church and participating in church services.

It is the time to serve the Lord. Seeing how the people show their generosity, support, help, perform charitable service, and show their love for others, I can see the real church — church that is concerned with others in need; the church that prays for one another.

With technology, people are joining the online Masses. Some prepare an altar with candles and put on the livestreaming of the Mass. Others even dress up with Sunday's best clothes in their homes as they participate in online live Mass. I can see that people value the Mass. But I can feel their longing in their hearts to be in God's presence inside the church with the bigger family of God.

I think this pandemic is strengthening the faith of the people. It is bringing them closer to God. It brings out the love of God in them. This crisis shall pass.

[Jennibeth Sabay is a junior sister of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Castres, a missionary congregation committed to the poorest of the poor. Before entering the novitiate in 2016, she was a public health nurse in Cebu Provincial Health office. Presently, she assists in a program called Pastoral Care for Children-Philippines and volunteers in medical missions and social actions organized by different church organizations. She also serves on a vocation team and at Emilie's Home, a program for women and children in her parish and neighboring areas.]