News
Religious Life



The front entrance to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet's provincial house in Latham, N.Y., is seen Jan. 4, 2021. (CNS photo/The Evangelist/Emily Benson)

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Albany, N.Y. — January 4, 2021

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As COVID-19 cases and deaths continue to rise in the United States, the pandemic has taken a terrible toll on the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in Latham. In December, nine sisters there died of COVID-19 as nearly half of the residents became infected during an outbreak at the provincial house that has affected 47 sisters and 26 employees since October.

"Like all members of our global community, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet have been struggling with the tragic consequences of COVID-19. We are mourning the loss of nine beloved sisters to this awful disease," said St. Joseph Sr. Joan Mary Hartigan, director of the order's Albany Province.

In a statement to The Evangelist, diocesan newspaper of Albany, Sr. Joan Mary said of the 47 sisters, most have recovered, but three sisters at the provincial house are being treated by their personal physicians for the virus. The nine sisters who died ranged in age from 84 to 98. Twenty-one employees who tested positive have recovered while five staff members are quarantining at home.

She said the home is following all guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the New York State Department of Health "to limit the spread of the virus to the greatest extent possible, including using appropriate personal protective equipment, quarantining sisters who are COVID-19 positive and prohibiting all public access."

She added: "We pray the increasing number of cases across our country is temporary, and we mourn the loss not only of our nine sisters but also the loss of all life during this pandemic. We look forward to the vaccine and the end of this worldwide health crisis."

The Albany Times Union first reported the sisters' deaths Dec 30.

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The order's provincial house in Latham, seven miles from Albany, is the headquarters of the Albany Province and home to 114 sisters; many are retired and in need of long-term care.

Since Thanksgiving, cases have skyrocketed across the country and in upstate New York. And with the recently celebrated Christmas and New Year's holidays, many fear the worst is yet to come in January. The positivity rate, based on a seven-day average, which has been as high as 12.4 percent in Albany County, currently is 10.5 percent and 10.8 percent in Schenectady County, according to the state's COVID-19 dashboard.

"All of us at the Diocese of Albany are praying for the sisters during this challenging time," said Mary DeTurris Poust, director of communications for the Diocese of Albany. "In addition to the loss of so many beloved sisters who served others so selflessly for decades, there is the added difficulty of not being able to celebrate their lives as a community due to COVID restrictions. As for so many people who have lost loved ones in recent months, the already difficult task of grieving is made even more difficult by isolation and lack of closure."

The recent rise in infections and deaths is all the more unsettling when you take into account the stringent procedures the sisters have had in place since the pandemic started such as ending public access and visits to the provincial house, including from other sisters, and canceling events, meetings and programs.

The sisters' deaths follow the COVID-19 deaths of eight sisters in mid-December in Milwaukee who had been living at the facility Notre Dame of Elm Grove.

Much like with the Sisters of St. Joseph, the School Sisters of Notre Dame Central Pacific Province, who are based in St. Louis and care for the sisters in the Wisconsin health facility learned of a positive case within the community around Thanksgiving. The first death reportedly happened Dec. 9, but the deadliest day came Dec. 14 when four sisters died. Many of these sisters had been teachers.