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Seminarians and Sr. Preetha Varghese, a member of the Sisters of Imitation of Christ who is in charge of the Food for Hungry program, cook food at the cathedral hall in the headquarters of Gurgaon Syro-Malankara diocese in New Delhi's Neb Sarai area to distribute to those who are in need. (Jessy Joseph)



by Jessy Joseph

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Sr. Preetha Varghese has been feeding hundreds of people living in poverty in the streets of New Delhi after her arrival in the Indian capital in 2016.

The 44-year-old member of the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ, also called the Bethany Sisters, works for Prachodana Social Service Society, the social service wing of Gurgaon eparchy of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church, one of the two Eastern Catholic rites in India. It is the youngest among 23 self-governing Eastern ritual churches in full communion with the pope, established on March 26, 2015, for the Syro-Malankara Catholics living in Delhi and surrounding areas.

"Hunger is more dangerous than coronavirus," said Varghese, who currently oversees Prachodana's Food for Hungry program.

Varghese shared with Global Sisters Report about her involvement in the food distribution program.

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***GSR*: How did you begin the food distribution program?**

Varghese: I was transferred from Kerala [in southwestern India] to New Delhi in 2016. My provincial asked me to help the diocesan activities in Delhi. Bishop [Jacob] Barnabas [of Gurgaon] asked me to assist in distributing food, clothes and medicine to the poor and the needy. I was disturbed to see starving people in Delhi's slums, on pavements and on the banks of the Yamuna River. When I was asked to distribute food to the hungry, I was happy that I could reach out to them.

But I had no previous experience in social work. In Kerala, I was engaged in a family-visit apostolate. So it was difficult in the initial days in Delhi. There were times I doubted I would be able to continue in the mission.

How did you overcome those doubts?

I kept reminding myself about the mission my congregation had entrusted me. I spent time in prayer and reflection that gave me strength to overcome the difficulties. The joy in the faces of children and those who are destitute when they are fed keeps me going.



Sr. Preetha Varghese of the Sisters of Imitation of Christ distributes food on the banks of Yamuna River, where thousands of migrants live in garbage dumps. (Jessy Joseph)

Do you distribute food every day? How do you manage the program?

We distribute food packets all days of the week except Sunday. Food for Hungry is one of the programs of Prachodana, which was set up in 2010. Some 800 to 1,000 food packets are distributed every day. We also distribute clothes and medicine. Vehicles loaded with food and other items visit various parts of Delhi.

How do people react when you feed them?

We serve fresh, hot food to the people. Some thank us for serving them delicious, warm food. They tell us they rarely get such good food and then bless us. I feel a sense of satisfaction when I see their smiles after having the meal.

How has the pandemic affected your work? Did you distribute food during the lockdown? Have you made any changes in your routine because of the pandemic and lockdown?

We never stopped food distribution. During the lockdown, we fed some 1,500 people, even on Sundays. Before India imposed a strict lockdown beginning March 25, we collected food packets from schools, shops and families in Delhi. Every morning, along with our driver, I would go around the city to collect the food packets. Families that could not give cooked food gave donations, clothes and other items. Then we would go to streets and slums and distribute the packets. When we got a large number of food packets, we would go to garbage dumps and the banks of Yamuna River, where thousands of migrants lived.

After the lockdown was imposed, collections from schools stopped. Some people were uncomfortable when we visited their houses to collect the packets. They were afraid we could be carrying the virus. So supply from families reduced greatly. We then started cooking or ordering food from restaurants.

During the lockdown, our cathedral hall was converted into a community kitchen, and everyone — the bishop, priests, seminarians, sisters and laypeople — cooked and distributed food packets. The seminarians now do the cooking on Saturdays. We begin the cooking at 9 a.m., and by noon, the driver and I go for distribution.

The number of the needy people has increased after the pandemic outbreak, and Prachodana has included more areas for food distribution.



Bishop Jacob Mar Barnabas of the Gurgaon Syro-Malankara diocese, second from left, distributes food kits to those who need them during the coronavirus lockdown. (Courtesy of Fr. Nijo Kollentethekkethil)

How has the pandemic affected you personally?

To be frank, I was afraid to go out when the lockdown started. However, I want to journey with the poor and suffering, especially during such tragic times.

I take all precautions when I go out. I avoid spending a long time talking and sharing with people after COVID-19. But maintaining social distance is not easy always. The crowd jumps the long queue to get food before our stock runs out.

What happened after the government relaxed the lockdown in June?

We continue to distribute food, medicine and clothes to those who are destitute. When collections from schools stopped, Zomato, an Indian restaurant chain, started providing free packaged food to distribute to destitute children as part of its corporate social responsibility.



Sr. Preetha Varghese, a member of the Sisters of Imitation of Christ, covers a person sleeping on the pavement of the streets of New Delhi. (Jessy Joseph)

Name some bad and good experiences you have faced.

I have faced many painful events during the last four years. It is heartbreaking to see people clamoring for a meal. The most painful experience is to watch children crying for food and clothes. Most children do not get sufficient, nutritious food and clothes. I am also disturbed to see children staying away from school.

Once, while I was distributing food packets, some children asked for clothes. When I went to families to collect food, I requested them to give some clothes for those children. I will never forget the smiles on those children's faces when they got the new clothes.

When our vehicle arrives at a distribution center, we see people already lined up. Sometimes, the food runs short, and it hurts me to see some in the queue going back hungry.



Bishop Jacob Mar Barnabas of the Gurgaon Syro-Malankara diocese, left, distributes food kits to those who have lined up in front of the cathedral during the coronavirus lockdown. Every day, up to 800 people line up to get food kits. (Courtesy of Fr. Nijo Kollentethekkethil)

Do people recognize you as a Catholic nun? Do you speak to them about Christ?

The people we meet are all people from other faiths. They have no idea about Catholic religious sisters or priests. Some people even ask me if I am married and how many children I have. They call me "Mathaji" ["Mother" in a respectful way]. I preach Christ through my actions: by feeding the hungry, nursing the wounded, listening to their problems and so on.

Please tell us about your congregation.

I belong to the Sisters of Imitation of Christ, commonly known as the Bethany Sisters, under the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. Servant of God Archbishop Geevarghese Mar Ivanios, who was a member of the Syrian Jacobite Church, came to the Catholic Church in 1925. He is known as India's Cardinal Newman. He and his followers united with the Catholic Church in 1930. The pope made them a new ritual church and allowed them to continue with their rituals and practices.

Our congregation got pontifical status in 1956. It has 1,000 members now.

The charism of the congregation is the spiritual renewal of the Syro-Malankara Church, evangelization and the advancement of women through imitation of Christ.



People in need line up when the vehicle loaded with food from Food for Hungry reaches the distribution area at banks of Yamuna River (Jessy Joseph)

Why did you become a nun?

My father was a Jacobite Christian while my mother belongs to Syro-Malabar Church. My father died on Dec. 9, 2020. My father joined Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. I am a Malankara Catholic.

I am the youngest of three children and the only daughter of my parents. I was fascinated by the nuns who served my home parish. I used to read saints' books and was attracted by the way they lived for Christ. As a young girl, I had the desire to become a nun and give my life for Jesus, to my church and society.

But my family opposed my joining the convent. After much pressure and protests from my side, my parents agreed, but my brothers were not happy. My elder brother did not attend my first profession in 2000, as he was still angry.