Columns
Coronavirus
Spirituality



Sisters of Providence held a banner to let other sisters in the community who were isolated because of COVID-19 restrictions know they were appreciated and loved. The gesture was done several times throughout the pandemic, in rain as well as sun. (Courtesy of the Sisters of Providence)



by Karin Dufault

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Editor's note: *On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization said COVID-19 could be characterized as a pandemic. One year later, millions of lives have been lost to the virus, and people worldwide are taking stock of the last year and what the future holds. Global Sisters Report looks at the impact of the pandemic on religious life with a special series, Coronavirus: One Year Later.*



(NCR, GSR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

As Sisters of Providence, we are challenged during the pandemic to live our mission in new and unexpected ways as an international, intercultural, intergenerational and interdependent congregation. Our mission, "to proclaim Providence as the loving presence of God, active in us and through us, watchful over the created universe, and attentive to the needs of all," tested and guided us especially during the long periods of confinement. The second part of our mission, so relevant to the suffering of today, is to "proclaim the compassion of our Mother of Sorrows, in her intimate participation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus."

Ordinarily, most of our sisters would be first responders like our foundress, Blessed Emilie Gamelin, was during the Montreal typhoid and cholera epidemics in the mid-1800s. With this pandemic, while many of our younger members directly assist people in need in collaboration with others, the majority of our sisters are in the age category that are required by health officials to remain home.

Many sisters were required to remain in their rooms for months because COVID-19 entered some of our residences. A dimension of ministry became converting isolation to contemplative solitude in solidarity with suffering humanity. In our vulnerability, we were grateful receivers of Canadian public health and Red Cross assistance in our effort to control the spread among our sisters and colleagues. We remain concerned about the spiritual, physical and cognitive health of our sisters, especially those who are elderly and frail, confined to their rooms and whose ordinary routine has been so disrupted. Holistic caregiving during and after the pandemic requires special skills.

The pandemic magnifies our understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependence with our sisters and brothers worldwide. Our compassion and prayers extend way beyond the borders of our own congregation. With the marvels of Zoom and other technologies, we have learned to connect and form new intercultural relationships. We listen deeply to the suffering of others caused by the pandemic and witness how providence is manifested in the countless generous acts of self-giving by first responders, health care providers, all essential workers, volunteers and so many other heroes, including those very near us.

Sisters use their time and energy in various ways to minister to others, such as mask-making, making telephone calls, reading for the visually impaired, sending letters and cards to people sick and alone, making and carrying outdoor banners as well as singing for the confined, and praying for all most affected by the pandemic. With all whose loved ones have died of COVID-19, we grieve the death of our sisters who have died of COVID-19 and other illnesses during this time.



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Without denying how difficult this period has been for all of us — especially being limited from our usual communal spiritual practices, our ordinary ministries and volunteer activities, our ability to be by the side of our dying sisters, and our in-person participation in special events and countless other sacrifices — our trust in God's loving providence is strengthened.

Hospitality has been among our ministries affected by the necessary lockdowns of our facilities and residences. Here at our Providence International Centre, Montreal, where our general administration is located, we are unable to receive our sisters and those of other religious communities for meetings, retreats, conferences and chapters, as has always been our practice and joy. Our museum has always been a place of welcome where the public and many students have been able to visit and learn about the history of our congregation and its influence not only in Quebec but

in many other parts of the world. The museum is closed to visitors at this time.

Each year we receive women and men from Providence ministries in Canada, the United States and Chile for pilgrimages to understand the founding story, and now our borders are closed to such travel. For many years, one of our residences in Montreal has provided hospitality and compassion to out-of-town family members whose loved ones were in the neighboring hospital. This ministry, too, is necessarily suspended during this period of lockdown, though prayers and thoughts continue for all the family members accompanying hospitalized patients. Hospitality remains in the hearts of the sisters and grows as they anticipate once again opening the doors to others.

During the pandemic, we deeply miss the opportunities to bring our sisters to our international meetings and for our General Leadership Team to be able to travel within Canada and to other countries for canonical visits, provincial chapters, funerals, jubilees and professions. Like other congregations, we initially postponed many activities thinking that the pandemic soon would be controlled. However, that was not the case.

We quickly embraced the advancements in information technology and used it widely, making it possible to bring our whole congregation together using simultaneous translation in our three languages, French, English, and Spanish, with interpreters working from home. Zoom has enabled us to experience oneness in ways unimaginable before the pandemic. Since the pandemic, we began livestreaming sisters' profession of vows and all funerals of our sisters in Santiago, Chile; Seattle and Spokane, Washington; and Edmonton, Alberta and Montreal, Canada. Family and friends are grateful, especially since the number of persons able to be at the service is restricted to 25 people by health authorities in Quebec and other places. We are inspired to see how open our sisters have been to learn how to use new technologies once they realized its potential to enhance our relationships. Sisters help each other connect, individually or as a group.

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Daily Zoom meetings of one kind or another are both a challenge and a blessing; often feeling Zoom fatigue but grateful for what the technology has provided. Technology expands our world and worldview as we participate in numerous

offerings provided by the International Union of Superiors General and share our experiences of living the pandemic. Through Zoom and with interpretation, we have listened, dialogued and discerned with several hundred major superiors and leadership teams from throughout the world on subjects such as integral ecology, interculturality, human trafficking, peace and justice.

This network of sisterhood has been a source of strength and unity, as we have shared the sufferings and joys of our people and our earth. Within the countries in which we serve, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and Canadian Religious Conference have offered such opportunities through Zoom and webinars that have enriched us too and been calls to action.

While missing the opportunity to celebrate liturgy in our own chapel, we take advantage of the daily TV Mass in our preferred language and we unite with many others, and their needs, who participate from so many parts of the world.

The lessons we have learned from our COVID-19 experiences and that of others are many. Most of all, we have learned that creativity and dialogue are partners of hearts desiring to respond concretely to the invitations of love and solidarity. Secondly, our capacity for compassion grows as we unite with and enter into the suffering of others (in person or virtually). Our loving God-Providence is accompanying all of us with *hope* in the process. We pray for a discerning spirit to recognize to whom and with whom God is calling us to minister, once the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

This story appears in the **Coronavirus: One Year Later** feature series. View the full series.