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Coronavirus
Ministry

An elderly person waits to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at Casa Betti nursing home during the coronavirus pandemic in Mexico City March 11, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Edgard Garrido)

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Leaders from dozens of religious orders dedicated to providing health care services and residential homes for elderly and disabled people reaffirmed their commitment to continue serving the most vulnerable as the global pandemic continues.

Despite having to face the pandemic's onslaught one year ago with inadequate supplies of protective equipment — resulting in numerous deaths for workers and residents — religious men and women will continue to obey the Lord's commandment to love and care for the weakest, the leaders said in a joint statement.

The statement was signed by the superiors general of 45 men's and women's religious congregations, marking a review of the past year, renewing their commitment and making an appeal for action. It was published on the website of the Rome-based International Union of Superiors General March 25.

One year after the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, "the superiors general of religious congregations at the service of the most fragile people give thanks to God for the generosity with which so many of their members have given their commitment, energy and even their lives to care for those affected by the insidious virus," it said.

Many members of religious orders who caught the virus died, and sometimes it was in "painful 'solitude' but always accompanied by the affection, prayer and closeness of their religious families," it said.

The past year was both "consoling and hard-going," said Fr. Carmine Arice, superior general of the Brothers of St. Joseph Cottolengo, in an interview April 8 with Avvenire, the daily newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference.

The consolation came because consecrated men and women "showed vitality,

generosity and urgency in responding to the emergency, even at the cost of their life," said the priest who led the initiative for the joint statement.

Calling these men and women religious "martyrs of charity," he said the orders were compiling a list of their names and documenting how many died the past year as a consequence of assisting those struck by the virus.

In fact, the past year has proven to be "heavy" because of the many victims among caregivers, workers, patients and residents, he said.

Carmel Matthews and Rita Ray visit their mother, Rosalyn Redmond, 92, in a specially constructed outdoor visiting cabin with a room divider to protect against the spread of COVID-19 at St. Glady's Nursing Home in Dublin March 14, 2021. The sisters have not been able to hug their mother in over a year due to government restrictions on social interactions. (CNS/Reuters/Clodagh Kilcoyne)

"The pandemic found us all unprepared," he said, noting how difficult or impossible it was at the early stages of the novel coronavirus' spread to get needed protective equipment in some parts of the world.

Now that the vaccine has been prioritized for health workers, those living in residential facilities and the elderly, there has been an immediate decrease in COVID-19 deaths for this segment of the population, he said.

However, the latest spikes in infections are now "most of all among people living together as a family," he said, emphasizing how the priorities in vaccinations should shift according to the actual realities on the ground.

The joint statement said members of religious orders hope that "all the populations of the planet, even the poorest, will have access to this providential vaccine."

"We urge all religious men and women to promote this commitment both in their own religious families and in the areas where they work," it said.

The religious congregations signing the statement reaffirmed their "commitment to continue to place the person at the center of the services offered and the promotion of life in the best possible quality as the specific purpose of our institutions, seeking to continuously improve the quality of our offerings" as they run numerous residential services for the elderly or those with disabilities.

While governments have been encouraging the "deinstitutionalization" of assistance to people who are not self-sufficient, the statement said that "based on the experience of many of our realities, it seems useful to us to support the presence of facilities that, due to the possibility of providing even more specialized services, can be at the heart of the network of services on the territory."

They will continue to support and advocate for the family as the best place for people to live the final stages of life, it said.

"Effective collaboration between residential institutions and the family of origin is possible and gives good results in terms of quality of life and continuity of care," it said.

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