Columns
Coronavirus



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Is this the beginning of the end of the world? Life was flowing quickly but came to a sudden stop. A great fear enveloped all. It was as if Revelation 18: 22 had become a reality. The unseen virus has traumatized everyone. The lifestyle promoted by globalization received an unexpected blow. No one was prepared to face this situation — not even religious women. Personal lives and community life were forced to undergo a great transformation. There was no other choice.

However, pandemic has given us time: time to shut down, slow down; time to introspect, reassess, reprioritize and restart. Real reflection occurs when we are in crisis. Now it is occurring at the global level — across all countries, sectors and cultures — without distinguishing north or south.

As this new situation affected us physically, mentally and spiritually, we were advised to adopt certain responses to the situation. The physical response to prevent COVID-19 were self-isolation, wearing a mask, hand and face hygiene and social distancing. Positive mental responses to combat self-isolation included yoga, meditation and ways to find inner joy. Spiritual responses called for deep spirituality: faith in God and knowing our worth as children of God, leading to real self-esteem and altruistic activities.

There were impacts on religious communities. As public worship places closed, all religious communities initiated adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and intercessory prayers for affected people and their caregivers. Joining online daily Eucharistic celebrations became the norm, and online retreats were well attended, but we missed Holy Week prayer services in church, attended as they usually are by huge crowds.

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However, it gave us the opportunity to prepare creative liturgies. We celebrated Holy Week with deep feeling and real devotion. The Word of God was read widely, and was a strengthening experience. Prayer — springing from the depth of our beings — became very deep and intense. Special prayers were offered for the relief of suffering humanity

Religious led the way in helping people on the margins with relief work. Congregations took the initiative in pooling funds to distribute kits of food items,

which were a great relief to people with fewer resources. But many religious faced financial problems themselves, and benefactors rose to the occasion and supplied them with food items.

It gave us the chance to experience the poverty and the insecurity of poor people, and was a great lesson that we cannot take anything for granted. Yes, we are called to grow in the "attitude of gratitude" for everything life brings. Now we are more aware that anything can be taken away without any warning. As the saying goes, "When you have sight you never realize the value of your eyes."

Some religious communities and institutions owned by religious had to make new arrangements with their employees as their income dropped suddenly. Religious had been the providers, and suddenly everything changed. Communicating to their workers about the financial crisis was not easy, as many employees did not have alternative incomes. Even though religious have taken the vow of poverty, it may have been the first time for many to experience poverty in real terms.

The restriction on travel was another big blow. Public transportation was not available at first. As using public transportation involves risk, religious were forced to avoid it as much as possible. Travel provides opportunities for fresh air and social interactions. Diminishing social interactions adversely affect people’s mental health; religious were not an exemption. Religious who had traveled far and wide were forced to remain in their communities — greatly affecting their mission involvement and outreach programs. It was like Jesus telling Martha, "You are worried and troubled with many things; there is need of only one thing" (Luke 10:41-42). Is this an invitation to choose "the better part?" Many communities increased common activities and group reflections, which promoted their growth in oneness.

It was a great insight that we can live with less travel, less shopping, fewer meetings and fewer outings. Advanced information technology not only enabled us to be in touch with our dear ones, but also to meet online for discussions. Even the senior religious learned how to use mass media.

Our evolving understanding of spirituality and mission urges us to search anew. Mission and spirituality are intimately interwoven. Yes, "*Our journey into the mystery of God is linked to the journey of all earth's people*" (Medical Mission Sisters Constitution Page 3). We are still in the process of becoming whole and holy in the Body of Christ from the first to the last day of our lives. *Becoming* is about a

consciousness of evolving, an ongoing process of transformation. "*Growing into oneness as a Society is a spiritual journey and it is a mission response to the fragmentation of our world*" (MMS 61 General Assembly Report 2019 Page 3). The continued presence of the coronavirus forced the world to enter into a process of becoming, and to experience oneness — not only in facing the problem but also in search of the solution.

And the Spirit empowers us to search anew. The Spirit empowered the disciples with strength, hope and courage in a life-threatening situation. Isaiah prophesied about the gifts of the Spirit (Isaiah 11:2-4) and Paul listed the fruits (Galatians 5:22-25). Let us respond to our call to search anew by praying for the gifts and fruits of the Spirit.

With the activities of human beings limited, I think nature is purifying itself from environmental pollution and renewing itself. "See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

Every culture I have studied teaches that inner peace and joy are available only through looking inward. The Indian tradition teaches that bliss lies at the heart of creation. This present unique situation demonstrated our fragility and forced us to return to God — the source of love, life and energy — in silence. As the Psalmist says, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalms 46:11).

I reassure myself that nothing happens in this world without the knowledge of God. Our mission in this crisis seems to be to communicate that even in the midst of misery and crisis, God is with us. We just need to remain faithful to God's call.

In an informal meeting with religious superiors Pope Francis said "O wake up the world and be prophets." His message can be realized only when we witness to what we believe and who we are in a way that speaks to our time.