News
Ministry



The sisters of the Home Mission project with Auxiliary Bishop Christudas Rajappan of Trivandrum Latin Archdiocese (middle, back row) with Fr. Michael Thomas (left of Rajappan), who launched the project (Courtesy of Felcy Mangalath)



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Families in the Latin Archdiocese of Trivandrum in Kerala credit the home visits by nuns from multiple congregations with unknotting their problems and refreshing their Christian life.

Nuns who have been part of the Home Mission program say it has revitalized their vocation as well.

"I received lots of positive energy when people told me that our visits were a big blessing for them as they were waiting for someone trustworthy to pour out their heart," says Missionary Sisters of the Queen of Apostles nun Felcy Mangalath, a member of the Home Mission.

Mangalath was among 25 nuns from 25 congregations working in the archdiocese who started visiting families in 2016.



Sr. Felcy Mangalath, seated left in second row, a member of the Missionary Sisters of the Queen of Apostles, and her companion, Sister Tessy, with the family that hosted them during Home Mission, an intercongregational project in the Latin Archdiocese of Trivandrum (Courtesy of Felcy Mangalath)

"People also told us that our visits have brought a new light to their homes and their neighborhood," Mangalath told Global Sisters Report.

The Home Mission is an attempt by the Latin rite bishops of Kerala to implement Pope Francis' 2016 call to strengthen and fortify families, says Fr. Suresh Pius, the

director of the Basic Christian Community, a guide that helps diocesan ministries function, in Trivandrum Archdiocese.

The mission continued until the end of 2019. The coronavirus pandemic and nationwide lockdowns forced its suspension. However, the nuns kept in touch with the families over the phone and through video calls for the past two years, said Holy Spirit Sr. Sheeba Thottittekizakkathil, one of the coordinators of the mission. (The Holy Spirit Sisters are the Apostolic Life Community of Sisters in the Opus Spiritus Sancti, founded in Tiruvalla, Kerala.)

They now wait for the situation to improve so they may resume the family visits, Thottittekizakkathil told GSR.

Fr. Michael Thomas, Pius' predecessor who had launched the Home Mission project, said the archdiocese prepared the nuns with one month's training. The training aimed to help the participants assess a parish community and establish relationships with family members, he explained.

The training also briefed the nuns about various offices of ministries in the archdiocese so that they could direct people to the right office for their needs. These include pastoral, laity, education, family, social and youth services, all coordinated by the Basic Christian Community.

The training equipped the nuns to help families mend their broken relationships, Thomas told GSR.

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The sisters listened to the people's expectations from their parish, and helped them understand their responsibility toward the parish's growth, says Joseph Joosa, head of a family that received a visit.

"The sister told us about our family situation before we could tell her anything. This surprised us and convinced us that the divine spirit worked in her. Since then she has become a part of our family," Joosa, a taxi driver and father of two teenage sons, told GSR. The nuns' visits helped him revive his family prayer and grow closer to God, he added.

The nuns visited all parish families in 49 of the 115 parishes in the archdiocese in the first three years, Thomas said. That meant 1,700 families alone in St. Joseph's Cathedral Parish in Palayam. The priest says the sisters' visits gave the people "a golden opportunity to review their sacramental life and to make genuine confession." Thomas explained that many people do not feel free to share their pains and hurts with neighbors, relatives, friends or even their parish priests.

Dinasevanasabha (Servants of the Poor) Sr. Balini Chittattukara says people disclosed their personal wounds from childhood, feelings of rejection by parents and difficulties in facing current life challenges. They also suffered from economic problems that spurred suicidal tendencies and doubts about faith and life.

Thottittekizakkathil noted that the mission participants had to leave the convents' comfort to be with the people.

The sisters, who traveled in pairs, lived with some of the families they visited in the parish. They got up about 4:30 a.m., completed their prayers and participated in the Mass in the parish church before setting out at 8 a.m. for home visits, accompanied by appointed guides.



Sisters stand in line, ready for the Home Mission, an intercongregational project in the Latin Archdiocese of Trivandrum. The celebrant gives a lit candle to each sister before the final blessing of the inaugural Mass as a symbol of Jesus sending out his apostles. (Courtesy of Balini Chittattukara)

They had breakfast with one family and lunch with another. They returned to the parish church around 5 p.m. for sharing and evaluation followed by dinner. Afterward they returned to their parish family around 11:30 p.m. They stay with their companion sisters a month before being paired with a new partner.

Thottittekizakkathil found time with the parish families "an unbelievable experience. We forget about ourselves listening to people's various problems."

She attributes their success to their Bible-based personal prayer.

"We prepare for the mission through personal prayer such as reciting the rosary, Divine Mercy chaplet and attending eucharistic adoration. This helped us to sense the situation of the family at our first visit. The Holy Spirit inspired us to mention the family needs in the opening prayer. We then invited them to feel free to share their problems," the 46-year-old nun explained.

A major part of the visits goes into consoling the families.

"It was a joy to receive calls from families during the lockdown that their dreams have been fulfilled," Thottittekizakkathil said.

Thottittekizakkathil says the Holy Spirit sometimes moved the sisters to tell childless couples that God would bless them with a child that year. To the homeless, they assured a house soon would be available. Some families later notified the sisters they had received the blessing of a child or a house within the year, she said.



A family prays during a Home Mission visit, an intercongregational project in the Latin Archdiocese of Trivandrum. (Courtesy of Felcy Mangalath)

For Chittattukara, the mission gave her time to personalize the Bible and renew her spiritual life before helping others. "I felt the Holy Spirit inspiring me with the right words, strength, courage and memory. I became a channel of blessing and healing to the families through counseling and therapy," she told GSR.

Sr. Nigi Cletus of the Congregation of Servants of Hope, a newer community founded in 2008 in the archdiocese, also says spending time in personal prayer helped her "reach out to the families, to listen to their sorrows and console them in their pains, to rejoice in their happiness."

The 23-year-old nun says the mission provided her the opportunity to serve people as Jesus did, "to see the families through his eyes, welcome and listen to them as he did, to love all with and through his heart."

The home visits brought every participant in contact with "the stark reality of" people's situations, Cletus told GSR.

Biju Prabhakaran, a 30-year-old Catholic, said his family could "share our concerns freely with" the nuns, who listened to them for hours. "There is a limit to what we can share with friends and family members, but with the sisters we could feel totally free," he told GSR.

Arun Anthony, who coordinated the sister visits in St. Jude's Church, Vazhayila, in Peroorkada parish, said the sisters visited all 270 families in the parish. "I am happy that families in our parish now have regular family prayers," he told GSR.

He said an elderly parishioner holding his hand said that the visiting nuns reminded him of his own daughter, who serves overseas as a missionary. "It showed how the people accepted the sisters and opened their hearts to them," Anthony said.



Dinasevanasabha (Servants of the Poor) Sr. Balini Chittattukara receives a candle from Fr. James Culas, the pioneer of the parish renewal program in the Latin Archdiocese of Trivandrum, as a symbol of commissioning her for the Home Mission,

an intercongregational project. (Balini Chittattukara)

Chittattukara says the members of the intercongregational team benefited from the mission. "Living and working in close collaboration with sisters from other congregations, of various age groups, enhanced our spiritual life," she said.

The single-room accommodations in private homes challenged the visiting sisters. They had to sleep and pray in one room. Some had to pin their washed clothes to a curtain to dry. "They would be dry by morning because of the fan," Chittattukara said.

Maria Bambina Sr. Joycie, whose last name was not given, says the strength of the Home Mission program is the ability of the participants to collaborate with members from varied congregations, ages and experience. "We were ready to adapt to different situations, sacrifice our conveniences for a particular cause, learn mature ways of expressing our opinions," she explained.

Fr. James Culas, who has led the parish renewal programs since 2005, says, the sisters in the Home Mission program have helped the people rediscover their faith. "The sisters might take about five years to complete visiting all parishes in the archdiocese," he told GSR.

Culas says parishes have Basic Christian Community units. "However, there was no forum for deep sharing. We realized our renewal program had to be family based, hence the Home Mission. We started the renewal program in 2005 with sisters and laypeople. We soon found out that people were more confident to share with sisters."

Culas says the Home Mission program's success will depend on how the parishes follow up the suggestions given by the teams of sisters.

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing** feature series. View the full series.