Columns
Coronavirus



A 16-year-old girl in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, prays for her parents lost in the COVID-19 pandemic this year. (Nguyen)



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Today, when it comes to COVID-19, everyone shivers in fear. It is not only in poor and backward countries that people are afraid of COVID-19; even in advanced and rich countries, people are also very confused and afraid. It has been about two years now since the coronavirus has become a pandemic for all of humanity, and a terrible disaster that has plunged the whole human world into an unprecedented crisis. It seems that the picture of COVID-19 globally is increasingly dark and tragic.

The coronavirus — a small virus that cannot be seen with the naked eye — is causing so much grief and division. It makes me realize that human life is short and fragile. There seem to be no boundaries between birth and death. On social media websites, we have been witnessing so many people passing away without trumpets, flowers or relatives to see them off. Naked patients on ventilators are lying under only a blank white sheet, trying to snatch life from the hand of death with each weak breath.

But eventually, some patients succumb to this evil coronavirus. As a result, many children lose their parents: According to Thanh Nien newspapers, 1,500 children have been orphaned in Ho Chi Minh City because of COVID-19. According to Vietnam's Ministry of Health, as of Sept. 21, there had been 17,545 deaths in Vietnam.

The fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has infiltrated a number of religious congregations in Vietnam, and the coronavirus has taken the lives of sisters and priests belonging to several congregations: the Lovers of the Cross, the Redemptorists, the Order of Don Bosco.

Saddest to me personally were the losses in our own community, the Dominican Missionary Sisters of the Phu Cuong Diocese. We were grieved to see 12 of our sisters return to God in less than a month, and to have about 100 sisters infected with COVID-19.

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Generally, patients positive with COVID-19 move to a field hospital or the local government's quarantine zone where there are dormitories, but those are crowded

and lack food and other necessities. If they can be in quarantine at home, they are carefully cared for by other sisters, and checked weekly by medical staff.

Living in quarantine at home helps them recover their health as soon as possible. They also feel more peaceful and comfortable, less worried about their illness. Luckily for us, since we had such a large number of infected sisters, we were allowed to stay in quarantine in the kindergarten on our convent grounds.

But some sisters whose condition was serious were taken to the hospital for treatment, and some of them did not survive this evil virus. The death of the 12 sisters is the greatest loss that has ever occurred in the history of our order. Most of them were elders from 70 to 91 years old, living in a retirement home, but one younger sister was 49 years old.

To protect the health care community and avoid the spread of disease, when patients die of COVID-19 in Vietnam, the local health care providers take over the cremation procedures according to the laws of the state of Vietnam. Thus, when our seven Dominican sisters died at the hospital, we did not have a chance to see them one final time, but only got a notice from the hospital about their deaths, so that we could pray for their souls.



A memorial altar with the remains of Dominican Missionary Sisters who died during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nguyen)

Five other sisters died at home, away from all the rest of the sisters in the congregation; only our two or three doctor sisters who were caring for the infected sisters could help them and have the prayers for the dying at the end of their lives. We were not allowed to gather in crowds, and had little time to say prayers for the deceased sisters; half an hour after the sisters died, the local health department came and took them for cremation immediately.

On hearing about the death of the sisters, we were really upset, as they died without a funeral Mass, farewell moments, and without the presence of all their sisters. According to the tradition of our congregation, when getting a notice about the death of a sister, all of our sisters come back to the motherhouse from their places of mission. Then, we take turns an hour at a time, reciting prayers for the deceased sister, day and night, until the funeral Mass is held, after which we see them off to

the cemetery.

The most spiritual moment before the funeral Mass is when all the sisters gather around the deceased sister's coffin to say thanks to her for accompanying us in our consecrated journey, with all its sadness and happiness, as well as the challenges and difficulties of life. At the same time, we also express sorrow about whatever made them unhappy in their last days, and ask God to show mercy in forgiving their sins and opening the kingdom of heaven, and welcoming them into the joy of eternal life.

In spite of not directly seeing the deceased sisters during the pandemic, our hearts have been with them constantly in common daily prayer, reciting rosaries and attending online funeral Masses. Through the eyes of faith, we are trusting that they are enjoying the happiness of the kingdom with Christ Jesus, for whom they devoted their life to serve, and surely longed to see him in the heaven.

As Jesus said," I am the resurrection; whoever believes in me, though he die, shall live. Whoever is alive by believing in me will never die" (John 11:25-26).

May God welcome those who died during this pandemic into the happiness of heaven!