News
Ministry



Sister Idília Carneiro, superior general of the Sisters Hospitallers, poses for a portrait outside St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Sept. 5, 2024. (CNS/Justin McLellan)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js

Catholic News Service

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"The church has always been in spaces with people in extremely fragile situations, always," said Sister Idília Carneiro, the new superior general of the Sisters Hospitallers, and as global rates of mental illness continue to rise, she insisted that Catholics have an obligation to expand their ministries in addressing the crisis.

The World Health Organization estimates nearly a billion people are living with a mental disorder worldwide. And Sister, a specialist in social work, ethics and human resources, linked the global mental health crisis to the fragmentation of community life and the loss of widely-held values that once brought people together.

The church, she said, is uniquely poised to address that issue, since "mental health is very much linked to the health of the heart."

Carneiro spoke with Catholic News Service in mid-September some three months after taking the reins of the Sisters Hospitallers, a congregation of about 1,000 sisters, working with over 11,000 helpers and volunteers, assisting nearly 820,000 people in need across 25 countries.

Like many women's religious congregations, the Sisters Hospitallers was founded in the late 19th century with the mission of caring for the sick, but they dedicated their ministry in particular to caring for those with mental disabilities.

At the time of the congregation's founding, people "very rarely saw mental illness as illness," she explained, prompting their founder St. Benedict Menni to start a

congregation to bring "mercy and compassion to the holistic care of people with mental illness."

Today, however, Carneiro said that people have become more open to discussing mental health, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic which brought the global mental health crisis into sharper focus — global rates of depression and anxiety increased by more than 25% in the first year of the pandemic, according to the World Health Organization.

The church, she noted, must respond to that change. Trends in the United States already reflect an increasing involvement of religious communities in mental health care. According to the National Congregations Study, the percentage of Christian congregations offering services targeted at mental illness increased from 21.6% in 2012 to 27.1% in 2018-2019.

It is precisely in that context, Carneiro told CNS, that the church "has an important role of hope, of offering a new horizon" to people struggling with mental illness.

While society as a whole must be active in addressing mental health issues, she explained that the church has a unique "differentiating element, because it is motivated by faith, with a dimension of hope and recognition that each person is more than their illness and has human dignity."

"When there is a mental health problem, it is not only the mind that is ill, it is all of the being, the entire sense of life," she said. "For the church and for us as a congregation, what is most important is to help vulnerable people who are suffering to again find a sense of life and hope."

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Carneiro said the broader mental health crisis can partly be traced to "the loss of strong relationships that give us meaning as a person and the values that teach that there is something here that is beyond each one of us."

Beyond addressing the individual needs of patients, she stressed that "one must look at the global perspective, and society must ask how we can take steps to find each other again as people and help create that time and space in which people can make significant relationships that can help them."

"If we have spaces of connection and belonging where we are welcomed, loved, accompanied, as we are, that provides a structure for a balanced life," she said. But today "it is easy to find fractured spaces, (due to) the media, the absence of strong relationships that form community."

Many of the 25 countries in which the Sisters Hospitallers work are developing nations in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Carneiro explained that these regions face significant challenges, such as the stigma surrounding mental illness and insufficient government investment in mental health care services, though she noted that such problems affect the sisters' ministries in Europe as well.

Addressing mental health "requires resources, just like any other form of health," Carneiro said.

Members of the congregation are trained as nurses, psychologists, therapists, or social workers. Many also join the congregation with previous professional backgrounds, but Carneiro said that "theological formation comes first" when discerning a vocation with the sisters so they can fully live out "the evangelizing dimension of hospitality."

"Caring for and welcoming each person, that is the first stage of evangelization — to humanize by recognizing their dignity," she said. "Hospitality, as we live it in our charism, obliges us to welcome all, independently of religion or their life plans."

Evangelization today, she added, "is a challenge in its expression, but not in its root, because the root comes to us as the institution of the church," whose nature is to evangelize through relationships.

"It is not only through the explicit proclamation of words; for us it is to evangelize through our lives as service, as a gift, through our dedication to care," she said. "The challenge is for the church to establish that closeness."