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St. Ann of Providence Sr. Severine Menezes, with her sisters during their general chapter in Rome with Pope Francis (Courtesy of Severine Menezes)



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The Conference of Women Religious India, the world's largest national forum of nuns, said that Pope Francis had given them "more strength, dignity and space in the church."

"His love for religious life — especially for women in mission — gave us strength and dignity," said Sr. Maria Nirmalini, the conference president in a condolence message to the nuns in India.

The conference has around 103,000 members spread over 280 religious congregations.

"Pope Francis inspired us to live the Gospel with courage and tenderness. He called us to go beyond comfort, to accompany the broken, and to witness to God's mercy in a wounded world," Nirmalini wrote.

Nirmalini, who is superior general of the Apostolic Carmel congregation, said Francis was a true shepherd, a spiritual father — a gentle, prophetic and profoundly human who led with "compassion, humility and a deep love for the margin."

"His legacy will continue to guide us in our journey of faith and service," she added.



Catholic nuns of various congregations in India are pictured during a training event. The Conference of Women Religious in India has around 103,000 members (CWRI website)

St. Ann of Providence Sr. Severine Menezes, who heads the Mangaluru unit of the Conference of Religious India, told Global Sisters Report that she and her sisters had visited Francis at the Vatican in 2023 during a general council and were "greatly influenced by his simplicity and care."

"Meeting Pope Francis was a profound experience that left an incredible mark on my heart, my mission among youths, and my vocation," Menezes said.

"It was his love and care for the young people that drove me to work among students, youth and adolescents," said the nun, who is currently directing a retreat for a group of young nuns in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh state.

Sr. Sujata Jena of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, who visited the pope six months ago during the congregation's general chapter in Rome, said she was taken by his simplicity and respect for the women religious.

"Our experience at the chapter would be incomplete without our sacred encounter with Pope Francis," she said.

"I feel with the passing of Pope Francis, humanity lost one of its strongest spiritual and moral voices when we needed it the most," said Jena, who works against human trafficking and empowerment of women in rural India.



Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary Sr. Sujata Jena, with the participants of their general chapter with Pope Francis (Courtesy of Sujata Jena)

Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Dayalini, who works against human trafficking in Sri Lanka, met the pope when he visited her country in 2015.

The nun, who heads Talitha Kum in the island nation, told GSR that Francis was the "world's most courageous and unwavering prophetic voice in the global fight against human trafficking."

With moral clarity and spiritual conviction, he challenged the conscience of the world, urging action at every level of society against this modern-day slavery as a "crime against humanity" and a "grave violation of fundamental human rights," Dayalini said.

"In standing against human trafficking, he stands with the marginalized, giving voice to the voiceless, and reminding all of us of our shared responsibility to act," said the nun who serves in the Diocese of Chilaw in Sri Lanka.

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Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Sr. Dorothy Fernandes, a social activist who formerly headed the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace in India, said Francis had a magnanimity to embrace all.

"He created space for women's voices to be heard, recognizing the contribution of women by placing women in positions of decision-making," she recalled, adding that the pope's heart bled on sexual abuse cases, all violence against the women.

"He stunned the world by his efforts to transform the world, planet Earth, inviting us to listen to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor," she added.

Nirmalini said she was privileged to participate in the synod on synodality in 2023-2024, during which she had several occasions to meet with the pope.

"He was a genuine person, one who included all. His heart always went out to the poor, the marginalized and the migrants," Nirmalini said.

"As a woman, I feel particularly grateful and proud to have him as a leader of the church. He took great strides in giving importance to women in the church by appointing several women to important positions in the Vatican."

Sr. Chinnamma Scaria from a secular institute of the Maids of the Poor, based in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, said she longed to meet the pope in India but he never came to the country.

"But Pope Francis is always closer to our hearts as someone who embraced the sick, prisoners, children, migrants and refugees," said Scaria, a health care professional running a rural clinic.

Franciscan Sisters of Mary Immaculate Sr. Christina Fernandes said that her inspiration to work among leprosy patients and women in the periphery came from Francis, who always cherished the spirit of Jesus in him.

"As a religious I learn from Pope Francis to be the witness of God's closeness to those who suffer when I clean the wounds of a leprosy patient or caring for the people with disability," Christina Fernandes said.

She said Francis also encouraged her to walk with the poor not ahead, nor above but walking by their side the journey of healing and dignity.

The nun who currently works in the Diocese of Karwar as a therapist among those with drug dependencies, also longed to meet Francis in India.

"We now look forward to meeting him in heaven," she said.

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.