Columns
Religious Life



Sr. Valentine Cota assists physiotherapist Dr. Sneha Dargalkar at the Fr. Faustino Charitable Clinic and Physiotherapy Center, run by the Holy Family Sisters in Sancoale, Goa, India. (Courtesy of Molly Fernades)



by Molly Fernandes

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Sancoale, a village known by very few people, came to the fore after the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family was established in 1935. It became better known when the canonization process of the venerable Joseph Vaz was restarted in 1934 by Fr. Faustino de Souza, the founder of the Holy Family Sisters of Goa.

In the quiet corners of the Sancoale valley, where the breeze carries whispers of prayer and the scent of medicinal balm, one figure has remained a constant presence of comfort and care — Sr. Valentine Cota, a nurse, woman religious and healer of hearts.

She reminisces about her experience since 1969; the hardships she faced in responding to the call of Christ, and her first vows in 1975. Today, she glorifies the Lord for his unique ways and plans for her life. Coming from a Portuguese background, she found it difficult without an English education and even planned to return home — but destiny had other plans.



Sr. Valentine Cota celebrates the golden years of her religious life on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee on May 13, 2025, at Holy Family Convent in Sancoale, Goa. (Courtesy of Molly Fernades)

The founder sent word in-person to bring her back. After passing the required examinations, she completed her formation years. "I desired to serve people through healing ministry and didn't find satisfaction," she recalls. She shared this desire with one of the general councilors, and though she was trained in accountancy and placed in the accounts department, her wish was fulfilled when she passed the entrance test for nursing at Goa Medical College.

Belonging to the congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, Sr. Valentine made her first profession 50 years ago, dedicating her life to the sacred ministry of healing. After completing her bachelor's in nursing, she embraced her vocation with both clinical precision and spiritual compassion.

As a young religious nurse, she served at the Nazareth Home, a home for the aged in Navelim, Goa under the patronage of Our Lady of the Rosary Parish, where she tenderly cared for elderly people. Her steady and gentle hands became instruments of grace, whether she was dressing wounds, soothing pain, listening to wrenching stories of elderly women longing for their children, rushing those in need of medication to the hospital, or simply holding someone's hand during their final hours.

Even the students of Perpetual Succour Convent High School, located on the same campus, found solace in her presence when injured on the playground as she knelt beside them with bandages and blessings.

I still remember when I was a student, watching her move through the veranda. Her care was never rushed, never routine — it felt like prayer in motion.

When I joined the congregation as an aspirant, she became my mistress, guiding me with the same nurturing spirit she offered her patients. Though simple and gentle in her speech and approach, she was very disciplined in teaching us to grow in grace and sanctity. She also meant what she said!



Sr. Valentine Cota celebrates with family members during the reception following her Golden Jubilee celebration. (Courtesy of Molly Fernades)

I personally experienced her motherly care and her soothing touch, always with a gentle smile on her face. Her appreciation during my formation enabled me to grow deeper in my spiritual life and drink deeply from the river of life.

At the same time, she was in charge of Fr. Faustino's Charitable Dispensary in Sancoale, run by the Holy Family Sisters and located in the parish of Our Lady of Health. The dispensary was a humble space which became a sanctuary for villagers from nearby settlements. With the nearest clinics four to five kilometers (2.5 to 3 miles) away, Sr. Valentine became their trusted caregiver — a doctor in a nun's habit who dispensed medicine and hope. The villagers believed in her healing touch.

Children in the boarding school, as usual, sometimes pretended to be sick to avoid going to class. But the empathetic and compassionate Sr. Valentine understood their psychology well — she would send them back with iron tablets!

As years went by, she also served the congregation as a general councilor, offering her selfless service. All her years of religious life were spent nursing and caring for the sick, spending nights in hospitals when needed after surgeries or other ailments, and attending to locals on foot — especially the needy and vulnerable.

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As a postulant, I carry memories that even today bring me joy and laughter. On the last day of the year, Goa has a tradition of making an "old man" effigy and burning it at midnight — a symbolic act of leaving behind the old ways and entering the new year with renewed goals and values. Those who passed by the Holy Family Convent near the dispensary would stop at the gate and impersonate the voice of a frail old man calling out, "*Avois*, *avois*, *avois*! Sr. Valentine! Something is happening, I am dying! Come, come, come out!" We would all laugh until our stomachs hurt. That playful act only showed how deeply the people loved her, the "doctor" they carried in their hearts.

Now much older, Sr. Valentine continues her healing ministry at Fr. Faustino's Physiotherapy Clinic, where she assists patients who come for treatment and helps the physician in the evening. Her steps may be slower, but her spirit remains undiminished. She is lovingly called "Sister Doctor" by the people — a title earned by decades of selfless service.

This year, as she celebrated 50 years of religious life with her family and community members, I thank God for her. She has been a living parable of grace, sowing seeds of healing in bodies and souls, nurturing hope and empowering people to accept and face reality. Truly, she has offered hope and light to the hopeless and to those living in darkness.

We are truly blessed to have her among us — a nurse, a sister and a healer whose life bears witness of God's love.