

Pandemic strengthens religious call to serve the elderly

When the novel coronavirus was at its peak earlier this year in Delaware and Washington, D.C., Sister Constance Veit said she felt like a blindfolded soccer goalkeeper, trying to stop something she couldn't see.

"It was a very heart-wrenching period of time. There was a feeling that despite doing everything we were told to do, there was this invisible enemy that was sneaking around and got past us," said Sister Constance, the communications director for the Little Sisters of the Poor.

"We couldn't see it coming at us, and we couldn't figure out where it was going to hit next," Sister Constance told Our Sunday Visitor.

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The Little Sisters of the Poor, whose mission it is to care for the elderly poor, have lost many elderly residents this year to COVID-19, as well as 11 sisters worldwide, including two elderly members of the order in the United States.

The pandemic, which as of mid-September had killed more than 201,000 people in the United States and 948,000 across the world, has impacted daily life in many of the Little Sisters' homes, where residents have not been able to spend as much time with their friends or loved ones.

"The most taxing thing on the residents so far has been not seeing their family members and volunteers who used to come through here very frequently," said Sister Joseph Marie, the vocations coordinator for the Little Sisters' Mullen Home for

the Aged in Denver.

Distanced in community

Sister Joseph told Our Sunday Visitor that the Denver home has been fortunate in that none of its sisters, residents, staff or volunteers have tested positive this year for the coronavirus. But the pandemic has still turned life upside down for the Denver community. Since March, the home has been closed to all outside visitors, volunteers and family members.



Visitors greet a resident at the Little Sisters of the Poor's home in Denver. Courtesy photo

“The virus has affected our entire apostolate. The pandemic has had an impact on almost everything we do,” Sister Joseph said.

Residents can no longer enjoy a leisurely meal together in the dining room. Many either eat meals alone in their rooms or by themselves at tables positioned far apart from each other. Social activities have been curtailed to minimize physical interactions. Loved ones can't stop by on a Sunday and spend time with their elderly relatives in the lounge.

“Six months is a long time to go without giving your loved

ones a hug or even getting to visit with them over a meal," Sister Joseph said.

Perhaps the most poignant effect has been the manner in which the seriously ill and dying spend their final hours. Normally, the Little Sisters keep a constant bedside vigil with residents before they die. But because of the pandemic, public health officials have advised the Little Sisters against spending a lot of time in the rooms where residents are sick with COVID-19.

"Because of the highly-contagious nature of the virus, the advice was, 'Don't stay in their room longer than you have to. Don't sit and pray with them for long periods,'" said Sister Constance, who added that even in situations where the Little Sisters could accompany the dying, they had to wear layers of protective personal equipment.

"We were so decked out in PPE that it lost an important aspect of that personalized caring presence because we were under gowns and behind masks and shields," Sister Constance said. "That felt so foreign to us, and I'm sure to the residents as well."

The Little Sisters have also had to change how they live in community. They have reorganized common areas to maintain physical spacing in accordance with social distancing guidelines. During peak times of infection rates, the Little Sisters did not interact with each other after meals in order to protect those who were older or had underlying conditions that made them vulnerable to the virus.

"Our community has still been enriched spiritually during this period," Sister Joseph said. "We're spending more time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. We've also been enriched by the encounters with the residents and assuring that they had that contact with us. As our mother-foundress St. Jeanne Jugan would say, 'Making the elderly happy, that is what

counts.'”

Shock, grief and prayers



A member of the Little Sisters of the Poor visits a resident at the Little Sisters' home in Newark, Del. Courtesy photo

Sister Constance, who lives in the order's Washington D.C. home, earlier this year went to the Little Sisters' Delaware apostolate, where she stayed for two months during the height of the pandemic there.

“In Delaware, we lost 11 residents between the third week of March and Easter Sunday,” Sister Constance said. “It was sudden and intense. We had a lot of losses at one time, and that's something we're just not used to.”

Said Sister Constance, “It was a real feeling of shock and an intense sorrow and grieving. We were giving them basic care,

but there was no way to stop what had started in essence, because other than treating their discomfort, there was no real cure for the virus itself.”

During the “acute phase” of the pandemic, residents in Delaware and Washington D.C. were kept in their rooms for 24 hours a day. For residents who were not sick, the most difficult thing was not knowing how their friends were doing.

“Not knowing what was going on, not knowing who of their friends were alive or dead, who was sick or who wasn’t, that was tough for them,” Sister Constance said. “I think our concern was we didn’t want to get them down by constantly giving them bad news, and yet I think we probably should have told them more, because they are adults and they wanted to know what was happening beyond their own door.”

At the very least, that highlights how much the residents in the Little Sisters’ homes care for one another. Sister Constance said the residents wanted to know who in their community needed prayers.

“This has indeed drawn us closer to our residents,” Sister Constance said.

Vocational affirmation

The uncertainty of when the pandemic will lift or when a safe and effective vaccine will be available make long-term planning difficult. In early October, Little Sisters from across the country usually attend the first professions of new members in New York City. That will not happen this year.

“They’ll have to make their professions without their families present and not inside a chapel filled with sisters from all over,” Sister Constance said.

In Denver, the Little Sisters there have suspended renovations to a part of the home. With no volunteers allowed inside, the

sisters' workloads have increased, but they are still finding ways to be with the residents, even if that means playing Bingo or having ice cream socials with fewer people.

"We're very happy in our vocation and all we do is want to assure the residents are safe, and that we're doing everything possible to make their days enjoyable," Sister Joseph said. "Our Lord has been with us throughout all these trials."

Sister Constance added that the experiences of the last seven months have "really driven home" to her how relevant and necessary the Little Sisters' vocation is in today's world.

"The needs of the elderly in our society are sometimes put on the back-burner or overlooked, yet this pandemic has hit the elderly the hardest," Sister Constance said. "It really has affirmed me for my vocation, the value of the work that we do and the mission that the Church has given us to accompany the elderly and to try to protect their dignity and look out for them, and to provide them with all the care and love that we can."

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