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NEWSLETTER



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**NEWSLETTER FROM THE PRAGNYALAY GROUND FLOOR COMMUNITY,
PUNE**

My Experience of the Covid-19 Pandemic

L I F E HAS BEEN A GREAT CHALLENGE during the Covid-19 pandemic which has turned the World Up-side-down!! Spontaneously my heart went out to all those suffering of the virus and those who have died, and their bereaved families. And then the challenge came to our own door. Six struck down by the virus; least expected because we never go out!! and least welcomed because we are in the vulnerable category of the old. Those who were in-charge of us were distraught at the very thought of six of us infected. Consultation with Dr. Preeti Rodgers confirmed that all must go to hospital at once to be treated.

Now, let me speak about myself. I was depressed beyond words! Finally, five of us were bundled into the ambulance going to Sahyadri Hospital very kindly organized by Dr. Preeti Rodgers¹, because no other hospital was ready to take more patients since their Covid wards were full. I organized my own schedule during the 7 days in hospital and followed it faithfully: prayer, reading of the Scriptures (New Testament), patiently receiving drips – 4 times a day – medication, following the exercises scheduled by the hospital, inhalation, breathing exercise using the Spiro-ball... The hospital food was unpalatable, but I endured it with the grace of God. To accept God's Will and the whole hospital schedule peacefully was a special grace given to me. After 7 days, Dr. Meghna, the doctor in charge of us, announced that we were discharged from the hospital. My heart leapt up with joy, even though I would have to undergo quarantine for 15 days at home!! During these 15 days, our meals were lovingly served to us by Sr. Sophie and Sr. Josephine, who were totally available to attend to our needs. God bless them for their generosity!! How could I be infected after all the good treatment? Sr. Millicent and I shared a room during the quarantine period; we prayed, shared, participated in the Mass on-line. I felt deep within me the pain of the thousands of migrants who died on their way home; the poor and the very poor, for days without food, no proper care, many, many of them without employment. Millions of lives torn apart, displaced!!!! And here at my safe home at Pragnyalay I was cared for with so much love and concern by my dear sisters, with special attention from Sr. Sophie and Sr. Josephine. After 15 days of quarantine, our blood tests were taken. To my horror, I was still Covid-positive! And once again I was depressed. Of the 5 of us, my test result was very high. Though distressed, I accepted God's plan for me. It was His Will that I suffer as Jesus suffered and I accepted the Will of God.

¹ Dr. Preeti Rodgers is the niece of Srs. Karuna Mary and Celia Braganza; she is a senior doctor attached to Sahyadri Hospital in Pune and is a great support to the Pragnyalay community.

Now it's January 2021, I am full of LOVING GRATITUDE to the LORD, and to the community, as I am now normal!! WHAT IS LIFE? I question? – LIFE is given to me by God and He dwells within me. He calls me to LIFE in His Kingdom; He calls me to rethink my Way of Life, for the future.

Anjali D'Souza rscj

No growth without suffering

Today, when I look back at the past months, I am filled with gratitude to God who let me experience human suffering even more closely.

Let me tell you – at first I did not understand the meaning of “LOCKDOWN, CORONA VIRUS, COVID-19” etc. etc. I had no clue, no experience of a pandemic, nor had I faced anything like this before. I had only questions in my mind and no solution until mid-April 2020. How to explain my feelings, my anxiety, in one word, my fear? Phone calls from home every day bombarded me asking whether or not I was safe (due to news through the media and WhatsApp and the migrants returning to their homeland). Then I understood how serious it was indeed.

I had recognized the symptoms one week before I was diagnosed as Covid-positive. It was Monday, the 28th of September 2020, when our blood was tested; next day, 29th September, early morning the reports came and guess what? Six out of seven of us were found positive!!! We were told to get ourselves admitted into hospital as soon as possible! For me it was impossible to believe this! I cried quietly in my room – Me a COVID patient?! But I accepted it somehow. There was no choice. Hurried packing, discarding unnecessary things, with puzzled mind and shaking fingers I rushed to be ready to leave for Sahyadri Hospital. In an hour's time we found ourselves being escorted there by Sr. Shanti.

On arrival, we were taken to a small room and checked thoroughly. We were all found to be Covid-positive and were admitted at once. I was in a daze, still unbelieving that this could be possible. We were taken straight to the 6th floor where the Covid patients were housed. It was a big ward with about 50 patients there already. My bed was near the entrance to the next room and opposite the washrooms.

In the ward, there was constant coming and going among the patients of varied ages – all looking alike in light greenish pyjamas. The ward was for both men and women. But there were no disturbances. COVID touched everybody and did not respect age, size, colour, sex, or economic status. I watched amazed at the out-going and in-coming patients quickly being settled by efficient doctors, nurses and care-givers. The fear within me increased at the sight of COVID'S freedom to attack anyone! Even in this constantly moving crowd, my fear, worry and loneliness increased.

The pain I experienced initially at the suffering, anxiety and fear around me dissolved in their pain, suffering and anxiety. Slowly, very slowly, the thought of God, His will, His design crept into my mind and heart. I looked at my suffering neighbours with His merciful eyes; I understood their suffering and mine with His merciful love and acceptance. Calls from my family members and WhatsApp assured me of their support and prayers and of course of my religious sisters and friends who extended their loving hands to bless me. The oneness of suffering COVID with so many people filled me with the understanding of God's oneness with our pain.

After seven days in the hospital, we returned on 5th October to another fourteen days in bed at home. The aloneness and isolation continued, always difficult for me to live with. It was difficult also to understand my need for unusual quantities of meat, vegetables, and fruits. My body seemed unable to be satisfied. The weakness that follows COVID-19 is of a peculiar nature, difficult for non-COVID people to understand, which can be painful for a post-Covid person whose body is on its slow road to recovery and normalcy.

The whole notion of suffering – in oneself and in others – now makes more sense, and it connects me to the pain of other groups like prisoners, beggars, migrants, and farmers. Now I share more willingly and lovingly the “Breaking of the Bread” that comes my way occasionally, but always now made more meaningful by the daily Eucharist.

Kirti Bhuiyan rscj

God walked with us

Etched in my heart is God’s PRESENCE and GUIDANCE from moment to moment, and in every detail of my life, as I look back on the first four months of the lockdown! It was a time of deep, grace-filled ‘Formation in Surrender’ in the practice of living from moment to moment. I experienced several miracles: the miracle of managing the household with no helpers, except Rita Toppo, who gave herself unstintingly for whatever was needed; the generous cooperation of the community, especially Kirti. She took on all the hard work, cleaning the entire house, gardening, making chapattis etc. and did it all quietly and joyfully. When things were getting scarce in the market, she also began planting vegetables, so we could eat the fresh produce of our garden.

Keeping to the restrictions of times when we could go out, I realized one met the same few people who would venture out to buy something for their families. One experienced great sensitivity, tenderness and kindness in our quiet exchanges behind our masks. One day, I was returning home disappointed unable to get any bread for our communities. At our gate was a young woman throwing crumbs of biscuits to the street dogs. I asked her if she knew where I could get some bread. She immediately offered to get me some, drove off on her scooter, and returned with bread! And when I offered to pay, she refused my payment. I felt deeply touched, and knew in my heart “It is the Lord” Another time, I was returning sad and empty handed, because there were no vegetables to buy. I saw a tempo parked on the opposite side of the road, a policeman standing beside it. When he asked me what I wanted, I said “I have no vegetables for our old sisters”. He took several kinds of vegetables from the tempo and put them into my bag, and told me to go home, again refusing any payment. A couple of times, brothers from JDV who knew Kirti well, came very early in the morning, and supplied us with many vegetables from their garden, and sometimes shared what they had purchased in the wholesale market. Our FMM neighbours too shared the yield of their land. In these ways God reached out to us through the goodness and generosity of many people, making certain we were never in want!

One big grace we experienced was the privilege of having the Eucharist every day. The kindness and generosity of our Jesuit neighbours made this possible. Food for body and soul was made available to us. Despite the frail physical condition of our sisters, we were all blessed with fairly good health and faced no crisis during the first four months of severe lockdown.

The lockdown also helped us grow in our sense of One Body and to expand our boundaries. The pitiful plight of the migrants, the people who lost their jobs and means of livelihood, the many victims of the dreaded Covid-19, our frontline workers, all touched our hearts. We felt our helplessness in not being able to reach out. In community we decided to make these issues part of our life of prayer.

Prayer being our main ministry in this house, during the pandemic, till today, we meet together every day to pray the rosary for the global pandemic situation.

In several ways, I think, we are experiencing an ongoing process of inner conversion! This pandemic has made us aware of the frailty of our lives! It has taught us the need to sit lightly, and keep our focus on “the Essential and the Invisible.”

Shanti Fernandes rscj

Last Blessing

While I was boiling milk recently, a thought came to my mind. Will it be like milk when it is boiled and slowly rises to the heat, when God calls us to Him? And suddenly I remembered what Sr. Livi asked me in the hospital, “Chotu (as she used to call me), how will I repay you for what you have done for me?” I had no answer, but now I really feel she was giving me her last blessing during the final moments of her life, her gift to me on earth. She looked at me for last time as she began her final journey to God with her hand in mine. Like Peter, John and Andrew I felt I was witnessing a “transfiguration” as Sr. Livi went to meet her God on 19th November 2020. Was it not a beautiful way of repaying whatever service I had done for her? I had never seen someone dying before. I did not wait for her last breath, but ran to call Sr. Shanti as I knew it was a sacred moment. A thought came to my mind that the soul, whatever it may be, is transformed. Death is a transfiguration. What we are on earth remains on earth; when we die we are transformed into God’s loved one. I feel Sr. Livi has given me a great blessing, I thank God for her and for the opportunity given to me to serve her, who was and is God’s beloved.

Josephine Pereira rscj

Veillée-2020

It seems worthwhile to share with you the way we prayed during our Veillée this year. We wanted to include all in the house so we invited the First Floor community to join us as well as Celine Lobo, Shanti’s sister, who was with us and Sunita D’Souza, the niece of Mary and Celia Braganza, who was spending a little time with us. It was a cosy gathering in the warmth of Anandalay.

During the Pandemic, the community agreed to pray the Rosary daily each evening for the healing of Covid-19 world-wide and we have been faithful to that practice over many months. We have also, in order to “be with the Church”, read a passage from LAUDATO SI, that ground-breaking encyclical of Pope Francis on the environment, in order to absorb its teachings and live them. These two concerns motivated our Veillée. We asked Sr. Josephine, our artistic member, to create an empty manger of straw on the glass-topped table in Anandalay and to fill in the rest with greenery. Green was the key-word.

We could not simply skip over the tremendous needs facing our country at this time and so certain needs were chosen for which we could pray especially, while not forgetting all the others.

The pandemic has caused a surge in domestic violence (violence in the home) world over. That sacred place, the home, has seen so much suffering and this was one of our intentions – to pray that Jesus come with forgiveness, peace and healing to suffering families. Several in the community were asked to compose an appropriate prayer for each intention, to read it and then we sang together an Advent antiphon, the familiar ones like “Come Jesus love and grace, longing I seek your face”, followed by a quiet space for adding our own deep personal prayer.

Secondly we were acutely aware of the massive problem of unemployment in the country, even though the newspapers give a modified version of the same. The desperation of people who have lost their jobs, the small businesses closed down, the general helplessness of the poor. For this we prayed that Jesus would come with his Spirit of new creativity for all those facing the harsh reality of unemployment. Again this was followed by an Advent antiphon and time for personal prayer.

We could not overlook the historic protest of our farmers at the gates of Delhi and the tragedy of a lack of the spirit of dialogue between the people and government. We called on Jesus to bring with his coming true openness to justice and true listening to the plight of the other.

So many violations of justice have taken place in the country which you will be aware of. Whether it is the whole affair of Jammu and Kashmir, the CAA protests, the threatening new Education Policy, the unjust imprisonment of activists, the harshness against any Dissent in the country, the continuing plight of the poor – all are flagrant abuses of constitutional rights. Our prayer pleaded that Jesus come with his own powerful sense of justice to transform hearts and minds and show us the way to “act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God”.

Our concluding prayer was “with gratitude we recall the humanity of Jesus and the life he shared with us all so that the power of his divinity help us to answer his call to forgiveness and to new life”.

A prayerful pause and we ended as we looked at all the greenery before us with “I’m dreaming of a Green Christmas”, sung to the tune of “White Christmas of old”: “May the peace of Christmas be there, in every humble human scene and may all your Christmases be GREEN!”

The dear community from the First Floor had brought us goodies to share and so our evening ended in fellowship crunching rose cookies.

Ambuja rscj

Golden Jubilee²
(To the Tune of “How Do You Solve a Problem like Maria”)

She climbs the steps or washes clothes
She helps us all around.
She makes delicious puddings
And goodies that abound.
And with her silver tresses
she’s queen though not yet crowned
today’s the day we want to put things right – eh!

It may be just a village
Or Dhole Patil Road
She’ll adjust to different needs just u take my word
And always she’ll remember to do an act of love
Our Shanti’s such an asset to Pragnyalaya
We like to sing this song of love to you
You know that it is all so true.

How do you help her whenever she is tired?
How do u get her just to lie down?
She might just listen for
The feet they must be sore
But o! she looks for more and more to do
How do we thank you for your care and love?
God’s blessing on you from above.

Niela Farias rscj

² Sr. Shanti Fernandes celebrated her golden jubilee of first vows on 12th December 2020.