

## **Religious Communities are Lighthouse Keepers in the Storm of COVID-19**

During these very difficult times of dealing with the Coronavirus and its effects, people are struggling in so many ways, grief for the loss of loved ones, physical pain for those who are infected by this virus, emotional struggle living in this unknown situation and the fear of what comes next, financial challenges for all those whose businesses and jobs have already been jeopardized in recent weeks, the impact of which might be carried for months and years ahead for so many people.

In the midst of all this, people have mixed spiritual struggles as well. Some are relieved that the Church has been following the government restrictions regarding all the faith gatherings, including Sunday Masses, others are struggling from missing the essential part of their spiritual life, the Holy Eucharist, which is the summit of our Faith. Many are turning to God, the Saints, and spiritual devotions to look for hope, others are looking for an answer, *“Where is God in the midst of all this?”*

Throughout history, human tragedies have fallen upon humanity; epidemics, wars, recession etc. Across the centuries, the Church has been the source of comfort and aid when people suffer the most. During the Middle Ages, Monasteries and Convents were the key medical centers of Europe and the Church established an early version of a welfare state. During the Influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, Religious Sisters of numerous Religious Orders played an indispensable role in fighting the flu.

Just like the early Religious Communities in America, who are remembered as the pioneers for healthcare and human services in the history of our nation, Religious men and women today in the face of COVID-19 crisis serve as lighthouse keepers in the storm of this epidemic. Lighthouses are meant to be seen as a directive point at the shoreline. Today many people have been writing, calling, reaching out to Religious Men and Women for help, comfort, consolation and spiritual support.

Many Religious Communities have increased their prayer hours, started many novenas, increased other spiritual practices for the intentions of the world that has been shaken by so many lost lives because of this virus.

Just like lighthouse keepers, the light comes from within the lighthouse and the keeper of the lighthouse is there to serve the purpose of the lighthouse. We Religious Men and Women believe that Jesus is the ultimate lighthouse and we are only His instruments.

### **Power of Prayer:**

In these days and weeks of affliction, prayer has become like the air that helps people breathe, the hope that they desperately need; the hope of returning back to their parishes and their faith communities, the hope of going back to a secure job and financial stability for their loved ones, the hope to find comfort in being with one another, etc. Our life of prayer and hours of Adoration is what we have to offer to kindle this hope in the hearts of people around us and beyond.

Our community has been keeping daily Adoration from 12:00 p.m.-7:00 p.m. Our time in the Chapel adoring the Lord and interceding for people has become our daily offering for God and people. First, to console the Heart of Jesus Who is suffering with His Mystical Body, the Church. He longs to be one with His people in the Holy Eucharist, **“How many times I yearned to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,”** Luke 13:34. Second, to console hearts of people who long to be one with Him, **“My soul yearns and pines for the courts of the Lord,”** Psalm 84:2. Our Adoration time and daily intercessory prayers and devotions are like the two oars that we carry in the boat of “aid and support” to all who are in need. The aid we give is our supplication before the Lord to care for His people during these trying times. It is in silent Adoration and heartfelt love before Christ present in the Most Holy Sacrament that we pray for our people to receive comfort that our Lord is close to the brokenhearted and a **“very present help in time of trouble”** (Psalm 46:1).

Sister Mary Ruth from the School Sisters of Christ the King in Lincoln, Nebraska shared, *“During this global health crisis, we realize that we are called to fervent intercessory prayer, begging Our Merciful Lord to bestow healing and consolation upon all those suffering in any way. We are more aware than ever what an immense privilege it is to be able to assist at Mass each day in our chapel and to receive Holy Communion, offering this prayer for so many who are currently unable to do so. On the third Sunday of Lent, our chaplain led us in a Eucharistic procession around our Motherhouse grounds as we chanted the Litany of the Saints. We have continued to pray this Litany daily after mass for an end to the devastation caused by COVID-19. At 3:00 each afternoon, the Blessed Sacrament is exposed in our chapel and we gather to pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet.”*

### **Outreach through service and social media:**

Some of the Religious Communities who have ministries within their own convent like Missionaries of Charity and the Little Sisters of the Poor continue their faithful and joyful dedication to the residents. As Mother Margaret Charles from the Little Sisters of the Poor in Palatine, Illinois, wrote, *“As Little Sisters of the Poor, we are exactly where we should be – in the midst of our elderly brothers and sisters, caring for them, doing our utmost to keep them safe and happy. Our elderly suffer from the sudden isolation, they miss their friends in the common dining areas and activity rooms. They miss their families. We try to help them reach out through Skype to their loved ones. We sing, celebrate birthdays, and call Bingo from hallways.”*

The Franciscan Capuchins from Capuchin College in Washington, D.C. make lunch bags and deliver them to people who experience homelessness. They leave lunch bags for them on a table under a bridge so the homeless can come and pick up their food, even though the Brothers continue to follow the order of social distancing, they still wanted to reach out to those most in need around them. The Brothers also have many musical talents and have desired to sing outside the building of nursing homes across from their monastery to comfort the elderly and the staff as they watch them from the windows of their rooms, as Brother Michael Herlihey O.F.M. Cap. said, *“We are hoping to bring to them the joy of music and the praise of God.”*

In our community we have made a list of names of the seniors who live alone in their neighborhood to reach out to them on a regular basis to help them with their grocery shopping since the elderly feel vulnerable to be out in public places. Also, recently we made a delivery of flower arrangements to twenty-four locations around our city; post-office, CVS, three grocery stores, eight Fire Department stations, Police Department, two emergency rooms, one hospital, another urgent care center, etc. I wrote them a letter on behalf of the community titled “Hidden Heroes, Good Samaritans, and Next-Door Saints.” Each Sister wrote a personal note with each flower arrangement. It is our little way of expressing our gratitude with the assurance of our prayers for those who put their lives every day at risk for the people of our city and beyond.

Many Communities who are very active in social media have taken these tools of evangelization to be out there for people who are in need of words of encouragement and support. The Maronite Servants of Christ the Light from the Maronite Eparchy of Saint Maron of Brooklyn have created a special phone call line called *“Need a prayer? We care and we are here for you.”*

When we read the story of the Bible, the storms were never evidence of God’s absence. It was the opposite; the storms were the arena in which God moved to show us His presence. Jesus calmed the storm because He was there. That is true then and it is true now. In the book of Ecclesiastes 4:12, we read ***“The chord of three strands is not quickly broken.”*** As we continue to weather the storm of COVID-19, we journey together in prayer and service, placing our hope in the Lord Who said in the Gospel of John 14:27, ***“Peace I leave you; My peace I give you [...] do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”***

Let us keep our gaze on the Lord, our Lighthouse, trusting in His promise that no harm will overtake us, no disaster will come near our tent, Psalm 91:10.