

CONFERENCE OF RELIGIOUS, INDIA

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To,
All the Major Superiors of Religious of India

URGENT INFORMATION AND SUGGESTIONS ABOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Dear Sisters, Brothers, Fathers,

The **urgency and challenge** of the situation is evident to all of us. I need not remind you. News, both international and national, is all over the place—TV, Press, Social Media. This is not first pandemic to hit humanity—the 14th century plague and the “Spanish Flu” of 1917-1920 were far more disastrous. In both, the Church, particularly religious, played a heroic role. So, too, the two world wars. Nowadays, the news hits us instantaneously. Wealthier countries which never, ever imagined that such a medical emergency would hit them, have been shaken. And this has rattled everyone, everywhere.

As you know, there is as yet no vaccine or medicine for this virus. Prevention is the only answer. Hence the drastic steps taken by governments, such as, the lockdown of whole countries, which has never happened before on this scale, even during war.

There is also **another tragedy or “pandemic”** caused by this virus and our response to it. In a country where 9 out of 10 workers are employed in the unorganized sector—with no insurance or permanent job or pension—the closing down of business meant: No job, no salary, no food. Plus, often, no place to stay. Hence the thousands of migrant workers struggling to get back to their home state, even walking hundreds of kilometres.

They need food and shelter—urgently.

In every situation we face, God has a message for us, which we need to hear, and respond to. The question facing us, Church in India (and elsewhere), especially its leadership and its special cadre (priests and religious) is: **What is God asking us to do? How are we supposed to respond?**

This letter is about that. There are things we need to DO and to AVOID to protect ourselves and those in our care. At the same time, we need to reach out and help those who, unlike us, are truly in a helpless and even desperate situation. Let me mention a number of Institutes and persons who are making a difference, from whose example all of us can learn.

A. THINGS TO DO (for our own protection):

- (1) Follow all government rules and guidelines (on staying at home, on quarantine, etc.)
- (2) Practice social distancing: When we need to interact with people, keep a distance of 1.5 to 2 metres. (This prevents droplets from an affected person’s cough, sneeze or talk from reaching others). There are religious communities in Italy and Spain where most of the members fell sick with COVID-19.
- (3) Practice respiratory hygiene: Cover your mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, and throw the tissue into a closed container. This is to protect others.

- (4) Wash hands frequently and when coming from outside, or touching objects handled by others (e.g., vegetables, newspaper, door knobs, ...). Wash WITH SOAP, thoroughly, for 20 seconds. This is better than using sanitizers.
- (5) Keep a few sanitizers in the house.
- (6) Support people through social media contact—phone calls, sms, WhatsApp, etc. This is the time to show more love and concern towards one another. Avoiding physical contact should be supplemented by more contacts of this type.
- (7) Prayer: Gives us strength and peace and shows us how to love and help one another.
- (8) Be more attentive to the more vulnerable, namely, the elderly and those with existing medical conditions (asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease).
- (9) Self-isolate oneself (stay in one's room) when we have cold or fever.
- (10) Gargle with warm saline water twice a day.
- (11) Simplify life. This is a good time to check what we really need and what we don't.
- (12) Start a kitchen garden if you have space.
- (13) Establish guidelines (in consultation with doctors) on what to do if a community member or employee gets sick.
- (14) Have an agreement with the government officials and the police for helping the needy, e.g., providing food, providing buildings for quarantine, etc.
- (15) Plan to have one or more rooms for isolating sick people, should the need arise.

B. THINGS TO AVOID

- (1) Travel, even going out of the house, except for necessities.
- (2) Meeting in groups
- (3) Being physically closer than 1.5 metres
- (4) Getting visitors
- (5) "Touching M-E-N" (mouth, eyes, nose). This is how infection spreads from the hands to our organism.
- (6) Touching surfaces and objects on which the virus may be found. (So, wooden, plastic and metal surfaces should be cleaned with a cleaning solution, since the virus can survive on them for many hours. Since newspapers have no cover, and we do not know who or what they have been in contact with, it may be good to discontinue getting newspapers. But pay the one who brings it; local distributors are often poorer people who need that money.)

C. REACHING OUT TO THE VICTIMS:

While we have the means—clean, well-maintained houses with good rooms and much space, good food, medical care, time and space for work, prayer, meals and relaxation, and tremendous financial security—many thousands (and millions) in our country do not. Their immediate cry is not escaping COVID-19, but for **food and shelter**. A number of good people and institutions are reaching out in very loving and effective ways. Let me list a few, so that we can learn from them, contact them, if we desire, and do our part.

We need to MOVE FAST. THIS IS AN EMERGENCY!

Sorry if I cannot list all the reach-out initiatives going on, but just a sample, which I happen to know:

- (1) Bro Varghese SG (Hyderabad): providing food for 500 scavengers. In collaboration with the government and police. (Phone: 9000206845).
- (2) Bangalore Province of the Salesians: Has put the Don Bosco College, Angadikkadavu, at the disposal of the government for keeping sick people. They are also providing a kit with essentials (rice, dal, etc.) and distributing it in several places. Plus: making masks for free distribution. (Phone: Economer, Fr George 8904962250).
- (3) Bangalore Archdiocese has set apart some schools for the same purpose.
- (4) Bro Steve Rocha of Columba's School, Delhi: trying to feed 4000 vulnerable families of children associated with Children's Parliaments. (Phone: 9911602999)

- (5) Salesians of Hyderabad province: Production of masks for free distribution. Kit with essentials, given out in different parts of Andhra and Telengana. (Contact: Fr B Sudhakar 9985727032)
- (6) Fr Anand and other IMS fathers providing food and other essentials to 400 people stranded in railway stations, bus stands, etc., and over 100 families everyday (9129477160)
- (7) Sister Nurses of different congregations joining together to care for the sick in Meghalaya.
- (8) Some religious communities and individual lay volunteers have got vehicle passes. The police then allow these vehicles to pass—to take food and provisions for the needy.
- (9) Some provincials want to know how to go about this. They are keen on helping, but feel impeded by the lockdown and police control. We can reach out and help—by getting clearance and support from the government (Eg, collector or local MLA) and the police (Commissioner or local SHO).

LET US MOVE FAST, WITHOUT WAITING FOR PERFECT OR EASIER CONDITIONS. GOD WAITS FOR OUR RESPONSE. He is suffering in our suffering brothers and sisters.

If in each city or locality, the religious can come together and do something, we can reach out to many. Or if the major superiors of an area were to plan something together (providing kits with essentials, distributing food packets, making and distributing masks, putting our buildings at the disposal of the needy, providing vehicles and drivers to help poor or sick people to get home,), we will make a huge difference.

Please share with me, if you don't mind, what you and your congregation are doing. Others can learn from it, and, if need be, work along with you.

If the National CRI can help you in any way—by supplying contact details or, if want to help, but have no money for doing it, through financial assistance—do let me know. The CRI exists to serve the religious of India, and through us all, the people of India, especially the neediest.

Fraternally in Jesus,

Fr Joe Mannath SDB
National Secretary, CRI

Attached files:

- (1) Helpline numbers in each State
- (2) COVID-19 Information given by the AIIMS (which is very clear and precise)
- (3) An article by reputed economist Jean Dreze (a Belgian living in India) who is an expert on Indian economic issues. This is for those who may want to make suggestions to friends in the government.