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Religious Life

Sr. Stella Baltazar visits a sister admitted to a special facility for infirm nuns attached to a hospital managed by her congregation, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu state, India. (Saji Thomas)

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Sr. Anne Mathew spends most of her time in eucharistic adoration in a home for elderly nuns in a southern Indian town.

"Prayer works for me and is my strength," the 81-year-old former nurse, who had worked for years in Austria and Switzerland, told Global Sisters Report.

Mathew is among the 12 residents of Neya Deepam, a home that her congregation — Franciscan Missionaries of Mary — built this year for elderly members who can manage their daily chores without external support.

"We do whatever little we can to keep us alive. I cannot do much work, so I assist in cooking," Mathew said while drinking evening tea with others in the home on the outskirts of Coimbatore, a major town in Tamil Nadu state.

A majority of India's more than 100,000 Catholic nuns are older than 60, said Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Nirmalini, president of the Conference of Religious India, the national body of major superiors of men and women religious.

Many congregations do not have facilities like Neya Deepam to care for their elderly members. So, the Conference of Religious Women in India launched an initiative to solve this problem, organizing a 21-day special training in October for 30 nurse nuns from 19 congregations working in 22 Indian states.

Teresian Carmelite Sr. Sangeetha Francis (Courtesy of Mini Joseph)

"Our training specifically focused on providing effective health care to our elderly sisters to ensure they get a dignified death," said Sr. Sangeetha Francis, who attended the training at St. John's Medical College in Bengaluru, capital of Karnataka state.

Francis, a member of the Kerala-based Congregation of Teresian Carmelites with a master's degree in nursing, said the training was an "eye-opener" for her, as she was previously unaware of the needs of the elderly nuns.

Nirmalini said the training was the result of a survey that found that many women congregations in India are ill-prepared to care for their elderly members.

"We want to ensure that our elderly nuns get every possible care, because that is our duty," Nirmalini told GSR.

While the elderly require "our additional care and support, they bring to the church mission a wealth of experience, spiritual wisdom and mentorship," she added.

The impact of aging women religious could be managed effectively by creating a supportive and inclusive environment where their talents and insights are integrated into the broader mission, Nirmalini said.

The 30 nuns who attended the first training to care for their elderly members pose before their training block in St. John's Medical College, Bengaluru, in the southern state of Karnataka, India. (Courtesy of Mini Joseph)

The national conference commissioned the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University in the United States to conduct a survey, studying how women religious congregations in India addressed the needs of their elderly and infirmed members. From April to June, CARA sent questionnaires to 745 provincials of 360 women religious congregations in India.

However, only 190 communities responded, and their responses indicated most were unprepared to look after their elderly and infirm members.

Among the respondents, 93% were pontifical congregations and 7% diocesan.

The results showed 64% of nuns in these congregations are elderly or infirm who rely on others. Among them, 61% had retired because of physical inability. The survey also noted that 40% of the participating congregations had no facility to care for their elderly.

Charity Sr. Flossy Lobo instructs caregivers during a training at St John's Medical College in Begaluru, Karnataka state, India. (Courtesy of Mini Joseph)

Most common health problems among the elderly nuns, according to the survey, are diabetes, hypertension, arthritis/joint and spinal problems, heart diseases, chronic illness, and anemia.

"Our challenge is to ensure proper health care to all our elderly and infirm nuns," said Sr. Mini Joseph, one of the three members who conducted the research.

Joseph, a member of the Congregation of Jesus Mary Joseph based in Bengaluru, coordinates with the women religious national body and religious congregations to implement effective health care facilities in India. "It is a serious matter, but we can find a solution," she told GSR.

Joseph said the Bengaluru training was their first move to focus on the care for the elderly.

"These trained nurses will train another 20 nuns or caregivers within their congregations or outside, exclusively to look after the elderly and infirm nuns," Joseph told GSR.

Sr. Mini Joseph of the Congregation of Jesus Mary Joseph (Courtesy of Mini Joseph)

She said their team is in discussion with various congregations to develop intercongregational facilities and upgrade the existing facilities in congregations.

A major glitch they face is the lack of proper response from the congregations.

Joseph said most congregations have not responded to the survey, as they are not aware of the seriousness of the crisis.

"I wish all congregations respond to our queries so that we can together develop the required facilities and look after our elderly people who have dedicated their entire

life for others," she said.

But this is only possible if they share their problems, she said. "The veil of secrecy should not be a cause for denying health care to their elderly."

Meanwhile, some congregations, such as the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, are bracing to face the reality.

"Caring for our elderly nuns is a top priority for us; they have spent their entire life for the church," said Sr. Stella Baltazar, who just finished her term as the provincial of the congregation's Ooty province in Tamil Nadu.

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A sharp decline in vocations and increasing retirement of members forced the congregation in India on Nov. 1 to merge their five provinces into four.

Baltazar said they have developed several facilities to care for the elderly. The bedridden are attached to special facilities in their hospitals with special caregivers. They are under constant monitoring by trained doctors and nurses.

"We focus on the mental, physical and spiritual needs of our elderly members and engage them in activities that give them solace and comfort," the 71-year-old nun told GSR.

During her tenure as the provincial, Baltazar built the multistory Neya Deepam with amenities, such as beds with oxygen.

"It is very tough for those who were into active ministries to accept their retirement. They need to be gradually helped to understand the new reality," she added.

Sr. Anne Mathew, right, has evening tea with other residents of Neya Deepam, a home for aged nuns of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in the outskirts of Coimbatore, a major town in Tamil Nadu state in southern India. (Saji Thomas)

The home encouraged the residents to pursue gardening, agriculture, poultry and other interests.

The elderly also attend adoration and counseling.

"When they are unable to manage their own, they are shifted to the special facilities attached to hospitals where they get proper medical care," the former provincial said.

The elderly in smaller congregations are not as lucky. A member of a congregation with fewer than 100 members said she is worried about their future.

"Our nuns are mostly into teaching. We don't have hospitals or nurses among us. We don't know what will happen to us in our old age," she told GSR, requesting anonymity. Her companions now discuss their old age, as few members join their congregation.

She, however, finds some solace in their national body's efforts to address the issues of the elderly. "Unless we join some intercongregational health care facility, we may not get proper health care," she added.

Sr. Vineeta Thomas, a member of the St. Joseph of Chambery congregation and secretary of Kerala Conference of Major Superiors, based in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala (Saji Thomas)

Sr. Vineeta Thomas, the secretary of the Kerala Conference of Major Superiors, agrees with the anonymous nun's worries. "It is true that major congregations with hospitals and other health care facilities will get medical care in their old age, but that is not the case with other congregations."

She wants these congregations to depend either on other religious congregations or a church facility for the care of their elderly. Many congregations lack sufficient funds to avail such treatment, said Thomas, a member of the order of St. Joseph of Chambery.

Thomas acknowledged that caring for the elderly is "a big challenge" for religious congregations. "Many are yet to realize the harsh reality that their congregations are aging fast," she told GSR.

Three decades ago, the congregations grew young with new vocations, "but now the situation has drastically changed," she said.

"It is high time for religious congregations and the church to wake up to the needs of our elderly nuns, who have dedicated their lives for the church."