



# Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, USA Province

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A PUBLICATION OF THE USA HANDMAID PROVINCE DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

## LETTER FROM THE PROVINCIAL

Dear Friends,

The global pandemic we have been experiencing has been one to test the nerves and patience of each of us, and has created life-altering situations for so many. We mourn the deaths of those who have died as a result of the COVID-19 virus, and pray for their families who have had to experience their grief and suffering from afar. We also pray for those who have contracted the virus and are struggling with regaining their health. We pray for those who have lost jobs and incomes, those who are alone in this pandemic, and those who continue to serve the public, risking their own health and safety. We realize that this is surely a life-changing time, and rely on our faith and hope in God's wisdom and mercy to see us through.

This issue of our newsletter reflects some of the works of the sisters who, like you, have had to put on hold their "normal" work and activities. It also shares some of the insights and reflections of the sisters.

As many of you know, our on-site classes at our school in Wyncote, Ancillae-Assumpta Academy, have been suspended since March, with students and teachers taking part instead through virtual teaching and learning. This unanticipated change in structure has not hampered the spirits of our sisters or the faculty and staff at the school. They continue to provide an excellent education for our students, and are a source of support for the parents who are involved in this "home schooling" adventure.

In similar fashion, we have had to cancel the many retreats and programs that had been planned at Saint Raphaela Center. Fortunately, we have been able to offer live-streaming and in person Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament on a daily basis - something that has sustained many of our friends far and near who are seeking the presence of God and the reassurance of His mercy and kindness.

During this time of uncertainty and fear, we pray with St. Raphaela Mary, asking the Holy Spirit to renew His presence in us and to lead each of us to open our hearts and minds to a new way of being.

With love and peace,

*Belén Escarriaza*

Belén Escarriaza, acj



## Honoring the Handmaid Foundress on Her Feast Day

With social distancing being the norm for the last three months, figuring out ways for families to commemorate birthdays and anniversaries, as well as other celebrations has brought about challenges that demand creativity and resourcefulness. To that end, on the vigil of her feast day, May 18th, Saint Raphaela Mary was celebrated by the Handmaids with a virtual celebration honoring the foundress.

Reverend Dan Joyce, SJ was the celebrant for a livestream liturgy that connected the five communities via Zoom. Held in his home, Father Dan spoke beautifully about the life of Saint Raphaela and offered the sisters from the Philadelphia, Wyncote, Haverford, Miami, and Athens communities an opportunity to unite in prayer and thanksgiving.

Following the liturgy, the sisters again incorporated the wonders of technology through Facetime to toast their foundress and share their hopes for continued creative fidelity for each other and for the young women who are considering a Handmaid vocation.

In a somewhat unusual way, through "the fingers of a hand" (and modern technology) the sisters were able to follow the desire of St. Raphaela Mary to be united for this special event.

*Sr. Dona DeMarco, a member of the Wyncote community and staff member at Ancillae-Assumpta Academy, expressed her thoughts related to the COVID-19 pandemic.*

This time of human surrendering to the One greater than us has definitely made an impact. "For these past three months, it has been a hard reality of suffering for many people, those of whom we remember to pray for daily - especially the families who have lost a loved one to this virus. Our prayers are also offered to God for all the health care professionals risking their health in order to care for the sick affected by this virus."

In the Wyncote community, about half of the sisters live with a compromised immune system, so it has been especially important to exercise extreme caution and care. Even in the chapel, the sisters maintain a safe distance from one another.

Being a woman of action as well as prayer, Sr. Dona does take care of the shopping for some basic and health care communal necessities. She, along with Sister Mary Theresa Nguyen, has also added gardening to her list of responsibilities.

According to Sr. Dona, not being with her school family has been difficult. "I dearly miss seeing our children and staff from extended day, and all the 'graders' in the dining room. That includes all my 'deposit duty' helpers."

Sr. Dona adds, "I am looking forward with hope for a great reunion...in small groups of people, sharing air hugs across the 6 feet distance recommended...but being physically present with one another!"



## The Pandemic in Cameroon



*Sister Oanh Vo has been serving in Cameroon for several months and offers this first person account of her experiences with the world wide COVID-19 pandemic.*

The first case of COVID-19 in Cameroon was confirmed on March 6th - five days before the World Health Organization officially announced the pandemic. Less than two weeks later, on the same date that WHO warned African countries to "prepare for the worst", Cameroon closed all of its borders and recommended basic infection preventive measures. Public events, including masses, were limited to 50 people, schools and restaurants were closed, and eventually masks were required in public transportation. However, there was no real, total confinement, which would have been impossible since the vast majority live day by day, without having the means to support themselves for two weeks or longer. Cameroon remains the most affected country in Central Africa, but the total confirmed cases and deaths are not as high as initially feared despite its very fragile economic, social, political and public health systems. At the present time, Cameroon has approximately 2,950 confirmed cases and 139 deaths.

The fight against the spread of COVID-19 in Cameroon has faced many challenges. For awhile people were made to believe that the virus would affect

only white people. Most of the locals have neither running water nor a well at home, so as part of their chores children have to get water from designated water pumps in the village at least twice a day. Here electricity often goes off for weeks and even months, and Internet connection is usually poor, making it difficult for people to keep up with the news on the pandemic. It is part of the culture that multiple generations and extended family members live together, and several sleep in the same bed. Also, many people, including Catholic priests and religious, prefer traditional healings and herbal remedies over Western medicines for many diseases, including malaria and HIV. Sadly, when people do seek medical treatments, very often their condition has become so severe that the only care possible is palliative. In addition, the pandemic has barely curtailed the tradition of mourning of the dead, which takes place at home for one to two full days before the burial, usually attended by a couple hundred people, celebrating the life of the person with drinking, singing and playing music the entire time. As we have observed, local government officials have no qualms attending these events during the pandemic.



Last week we received from our local officials two small buckets and a block of soap for our health center! Some of the speculative explanations for why Cameroon, like many other African countries, seemingly has been spared from the pandemic are due to its large young population (more than 60% are under the age of 25), its warm tropical climate, and the possible resistance to the

virus either genetically or from having taken medications for malaria and HIV. Thus at the beginning of May the country started lifting its restrictive measures.

We sisters had been following the news closely in Asia and in Europe, knowing well that it was just a matter of time that COVID-19 would land in Cameroon. Immediately after the shutdown of national borders, we began providing masks and gloves for the staff to wear at all times, recommended frequent hand washing, enforcing social distancing, and praying together every morning with staff and patients for an end to the pandemic. Soon after we started giving a 15-minute patient education after morning prayer, providing water and soap at the center's entrance for patients and their loved ones to wash their hands, having homemade masks available for purchase, and requiring all patients to wear masks. Given the health center is very well known in the region, with some of our patients travelling 3-4 hours to arrive, we were certain we would encounter infected patients. So we tested all staff members, sisters in the community, and some suspicious patients for the virus. Happily we have not had any positives! With some funding from a NGO we have just begun offering rapid testing to our

patients at a low cost of about \$3.00, a tenth of what major hospitals charge.

Life in Bikop during this pandemic has been interesting. Without strict confinement and any confirmed cases, with ample space to walk around, and plenty of work and sufficient food, I feel like we live in a bubble, disconnected from the rest of the world. While the entire world is experiencing immense suffering

*continued on next page*



from the novel virus, we continue our daily, tireless fights against HIV, tuberculosis, malaria and other tropical diseases that unfortunately cause high mortality rates here. Thanks to our generators, we were able to be united with the universal Church in Eucharistic celebrations and prayers on television during the Holy Week and throughout the Easter Season. The fact that the pandemic spans our high liturgical time has helped me to contemplate our reality with faith. Because of the pandemic, we have experienced greater solidarity and compassion. Numerous people and organizations have reached out to us, prayed for us and some even given us masks, hand sanitizers, and financial assistance to fight the virus.

On Earth Day, instead of doing our usual service day of planting trees and cleaning our surroundings, we had Eucharistic Adoration outdoor with the staff praying for the world during the pandemic. Without daily in-person masses, I have greater appreciation for the sacraments and am challenged to live our sacramental life more concretely and integrally. Daily Eucharistic adoration, the source and mission of a Handmaid life, has become more apostolic for me. The great sufferings in the world call me to relativize my own struggles and pains, to go out of my little bubble and embrace the world with God's heart. I am invited to receive life each day with greater gratitude and greater detachment, even of my own life. The life of the local people challenges me to live more in the present moment, to truly celebrate life, and to live more simply.

Truly, we are living in an historical time, facing uncountable deaths, colossal economic crisis, and unimaginable social and political chaos. Because of all of this, some of us probably have yet to encounter the Resurrected Lord this Easter. In his Easter Vigil homily, Pope Francis encouraged us not to give into resignation and that to hope is *"a fundamental right that can never be taken away from us."* He reminded us that the women on Easter morning did not allow themselves to be paralyzed nor did they flee from reality, instead they did not stop loving and sowing the seeds of hope through their gestures of attention, of affection and of prayer. Unbeknownst to them they were on their way to encounter not death but Life. As one Jesuit told me, resurrection is a process. So let us allow Jesus to accompany each one of us in this journey from death to new life. Let this be the opportune time for us to leave our own bubble in order to accompany others and to carry their burdens. Let us be messengers of hope and of life for we are certain that the Lord has conquered death and is always with us, especially in this painful time.

## *Sr. Kayjoy Cooper Reflects*

*"I can't be a hospital front liner, but with all my being I find our chapel more than ever a 'front line', a 'direct service' for every act of Adoration, Gratitude, Intercession with the Lord whose suffering and triumph we daily experience - the center of the Greatest Love energy for the beleaguered world during the pandemic."* With these words, Sister KayJoy Cooper sums up her ability to contribute her energies to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sr. Kayjoy's experience is somewhat unique. She traveled from Miami in November, 2019 to attend the Handmaid's convocation. Illness and two hospital stays forced her to remain "up north" leaving behind her daily work and the people with whom she had been ministering. During the lock-down, she sees how Divine Providence works, as by phone people reveal their COVID-19 - related difficulties. She admits that the most painful have been the friends who openly pour themselves out over relatives' corona virus illness. Yes, there have been deaths. One in particular, the



40-year old wife of a deeply distraught husband, and mother of a 10 year old son. She explains *"Their relative, my friend, asked for scriptures which remind us that God is always present.... I was deeply touched and humbled by what people 'need' during crisis - God's Word pure and simple."*

Sr. Kayjoy shares that she is grateful for the blessings that have continued - daily Mass celebrated in the Wyncote chapel and Adoration, where she prays that the father and son not "lose" their faith as a result of this life-changing trial. It is a prayer that can be said for the millions of suffering and grieving people throughout the world.

## *Ministering in Miami Amid the Pandemic*

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there remains a great need to care for Miami's undocumented individuals who are attempting to legalize their status as US citizens. Fortunately, Sister Cecilia Chen, an advocate who works for Catholic Legal Services through the Archdiocese of Miami, has been able to continue offering her services "working from home" making good use of the internet and phone. Sister Carmen Cabrejos has not been as lucky. An employee at Camillus House, an organization that provides humanitarian services and programs to the indigent and homeless persons of south Florida, Sr. Carmen has been unable to be present at the site. The same holds true for Sister Gloria Petrone, who volunteers at Camillus House, though she has been a steady source of delivering snacks and words of encouragement. She notes that the many phone calls she has been receiving from the homeless express a deep need for solace and comfort, and explains how important it is to try to be a support and lift their spirits.

Despite the changes in their daily work, the sisters note that there is not an absence of activity in the community, with cleaning and organizing having taken a front seat. Additionally, Sr. Carmen has been able to supervise students in spiritual direction and via zoom, and was able to be present for the recent graduation ceremony of the program's participants. She has also been able also keep in touch with the ACJ associates by WhatsApp. Managing to stay in touch with family and friends through phone conversations, Sr. Carmen realizes the need to be *"open to the hearts of others and to bring to God all the suffering and pain that is happening."* It is a realization that is shared and strengthened by the efforts of the Handmaids in Miami.

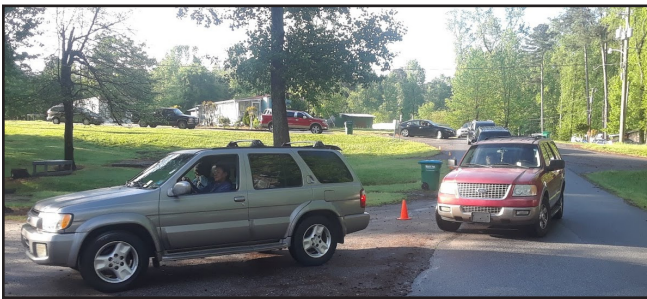
## Oasis Offers A Bridge

Oasis Católica Santa Rafaela, the Handmaid community in Athens, Georgia, according to Sister Margarita Martin, is more than ever *"functioning as a bridge between those who wish to help people in need with those who need to receive it, Thus, we can live out the 'obras de misericordia' thanks to so many generous people and the wonderful comadres (neighbors) who are helping to contend with the COVID-19 pandemic."*

Some comadres who know how to sew, took the initiative to make face masks with some remnants they had at home and distribute them to the people coming to Oasis for food. As a result, more materials have been purchased for them to be able to produce more "tapabocas" (masks). It is beautiful to see people reaching out in whatever way they can.



Many friends and collaborators have also been a vibrant group in helping to distribute supplies and food to those in need.



Face-to-face personal interactions have diminished significantly, but texting and WhatsApp communications are constant since people more than ever need reassurance and counseling.

Also, the sisters are cooperating with the Health Department and the University of Georgia College of Medicine to facilitate the Coronavirus testing in the neighborhood. Moreover, the ministry of advocacy and collaboration in the city of Athens has expanded participating in many committees and sub-committees via Zoom virtual meetings. Representatives of various entities such as the University, hospitals, schools, non-profits, and members of the government participate in these virtual gatherings.



*"What we are living now brings to our hearts what Saint Raphaela lived with her family during the plague in Spain reaching out to the people of Pedro Abad..."* remarks Sr. Margarita. All that happens at Oasis is due to the many connections and tremendous generosity of so many people reaching out to immigrants in times of extreme need, uncertainty, and instability. Indeed, there is much reparation work to be done!

## Wyncote Community Connects

During the COVID-19 pandemic the community of sisters in Wyncote, PA, has had the unique privilege of participating in Mass at home. The community's pastor offered to celebrate the Eucharist daily in the convent chapel - a space that contains some 65 chairs and allows the sisters to socially distance. *"Yet,"* describes Sister Sagrario Núñez, *"we have never felt more at-one among ourselves and with our suffering world! We are delighted and humbled by such a chance not available to so many others."*



Sr. Sagrario also relates that because life during COVID-19 goes on for migrants and refugees, the sisters in the Wyncote community continue to provide economic help to an Honduran family - a single mother with five children who are seeking asylum in the USA. Along with two other religious communities, the sisters' financial contribution pays for the rent, utilities, food, clothing and other expenses. Sr. Sagrario explains further, *"Our involvement in teaching Mrs. Montoya (not her real name) English as a Second Language has been interrupted, but we connect through phone calls, e-mails, and messages. Our efforts to present the Catholic faith and accompany Mrs. Montoya to Mass have also been postponed as we wait for safer times."*



She adds, *"We are also connected with the Rodriguez family (not the family name). The parents are from Mexico and Ecuador; both of them undocumented. Their two daughters have serious psychological difficulties and we do all that we are able to provide a listening presence for the mother. Occasionally we help the family with money, and frequently we share our food with them. During the 'stay at home' norm, the Wyncote community is also assisting the family by supplementing the salary of Mrs. Rodríguez."*

The Wyncote community has sent the savings from their Lenten fasting efforts to a family in El Salvador who has been severely hit by the pandemic, while the school community is helping several families of its students by providing food.

As can be expected, the sisters continue to pray with and for one another as they move through the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the hardships that have befallen so many. Their hope is that the love and solidarity they endeavor to demonstrate will provide some sense of support to all who are suffering at this time, especially those among the immigrant and refugee populations.



*Sharing Perspectives Through Two Sets of Eyes* Sisters Catherine Kirwan-Avila and Jessica Kerber, who serve in the Campus Ministry Department at Saint Joseph University, share their personal and unique thoughts and perspectives related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This seems to be a time rich in meaning and full, too, of contrasts. Somehow, I sense, it all fits.

On a personal level, I have felt invited into a slower rhythm. In many ways it has been a welcome shift. I have enjoyed sharing dinner with my sisters each night, praying outdoors accompanied by the boisterous chorus of birds that live on the property, cooking meals, connecting, albeit on the screen, with people near and far.

My ministry with students at St. Joseph's University has continued with a very different feel - a distinctly digital one- although the mission remains the same: accompany students on their journeys of faith, open spaces for exploration and deepening, listen to their experience and their questions, offer guidance, tools, encouragement. Many of them have struggled with different types of losses and changes during these months. I have also noticed among them an openness to quiet graces- unexpected time with parents and siblings, a chance to develop creative projects and new hobbies, space to reflect, a recognition of how much they appreciate having their friends near and their professors in person... Some have also taken up the opportunity to actively stand in solidarity with people who are particularly hard hit by the economic situation- fundraising for organizations where they had served during the school year.

Alongside these graces, I feel a strong sense of disquiet, an urgency, as we receive news from our sisters and other sources about the struggles that have been exacerbated or spawned by this pandemic in so many parts of the world. The UN recently expressed concern that the number of people who die of hunger could double as a result of the pandemic. We are in the midst of a great drama in which so many brothers and sisters are up against a terrible wall. Facts and figures can numb us, but God weeps and huddles with those who are being ravaged right now. What can we do to aid Him? What is our call in the face of this reality?

These questions do not have quick answers, but they invite deep listening in pursuit of an answer for today. I feel called to prayer, to listening to the voice of God in the midst of our current reality. What new horizons of awareness, of collaboration are coming into view? Where is life calling out to be cared for? Where is it pushing out beyond the bounds of old forms and models? What does faithfulness to the God of life look like now? Questions that are being asked by many people in different forms and in different contexts. Questions that bear faithful, critical reflection and discernment and that will lead to decisions and lived responses. Questions that we must respond to together. - Sister Catherine Kirwan-Avila

A few times a day now I get a message on Zoom that says, "Your internet is unstable." At least that's a known instability! Imagine if in every area of instability in our lives right now, there was a notice that appeared and said, "Just so you are aware, this is unstable territory."

When we are uncertain, we seek explanations. If we can give reasons for our situation of uncertainty, somehow, we feel more in control. Along with the many "reasons" that are circulating regarding the origin of the coronavirus, there are also "reasons" that try to explain why God has sent us this virus. Our hunger for reasons points more so to our underlying unease with uncertainty, our desire to do anything to get out of it.

What if we take another approach? A dear friend and biographer of St. Ignatius described him as "wisely ignorant." He wisely followed where he didn't know he was being led. What if we were to ask for the grace to be "wisely unstable"? The wisdom would come not from the answers, for I don't think those can be given now, but from our remaining in the questions. For the first time in most of our lives, there is a global situation that questions our understanding of reality and humanity's ability to dominate over any obstacle. It's hard enough to feel my own personal vulnerability, but also to acknowledge from firsthand experience humanity's vulnerability?! How do we sit with our human vulnerability? And when we stop trying to find a reason why Almighty God would have us living this, we may instead begin to faithfully wonder about God's own vulnerability.

Where, this week, will you choose not to take on too quickly an easy explanation, but rather choose to be "wisely unstable"? Maybe I'll learn to smile at my unstable internet and let it remind me of a larger truth. Because God and truth will be found nowhere else but in reality, even an unstable one. - Sister Jessica Kerber

***In The Middle of the Night...***

***During Eucharistic Adoration or Mass...***

***During a prayerful presentation...***

***While meditating or contemplating on  
our peaceful grounds...***

The fire alarm bells begin and disrupt the peace, silence, prayer, and sleep! Has this ever happened to you at St. Raphaela Center? A false alarm! The Handmaids are pleased to announce that with the help of St. Raphaela Center friends and donors and the Connelly Foundation, a new fire security system has been installed, tested and approved. We are grateful to continue providing a safe, warm, peaceful and welcoming environment to all our guests. Sleep well!

**ITS NOT TOO LATE!!!**

Each year through the generosity of friends and supporters the Handmaid Province is able to assist with the projects and programs sponsored by our Handmaid ministries, We do this through our Handmaid Province Annual Fund which extends through August 31, 2020. Enclosed with this newsletter is a remittance envelope that may be used to submit your annual gift. You may also submit an on-line donation via [www.acjusa.org](http://www.acjusa.org). Just click the DONATE NOW button. PLEASE know that we are grateful for contributions in any amount.

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## IN THE HANDMAIDS' PRAYERS

*As this publication was going to press, we witnessed the horrific murder of George Floyd. The Handmaids strongly support the statement issued by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious who have condemned this tragic act of violence. The statement is posted on the [www.acjusa.org](http://www.acjusa.org) website.*

***Please pray for the souls of our dearly departed including:***

Chuck Auer, James Bailey, Helen Barrett, Joseph Bottomley, The Bourgeois Family, Thomas Bowyer, Sr., John Boyd, Nicholas Breslin, Dorothea Campbell, Betty Cannon, Bailey Coggins, Joseph Coll, Catherine Corleto, Janica Craney, Rose D'Annibale, Philippe De Baslincourt, Dr. Hank De Vincent, Elizabeth Dickin, Anthony DiOttavio, Lydia DiPietro, Kay Domenick, Kathleen Engel, Annunziata Farrace, Christina Ferrante, Lorrie Firelli, George Floyd, Brendan Fitzpatrick, Martee Geller, Sally Gendler, David Gitter, Francis Golden, David Grace, Peg Greenhalgh, Nora Grogan, Marjorie Harrington, Matthew Hearn, Ann Henner, Patrick Huber, Joyce Jennings, Fred Katein, Joseph Kauric, William Kearney, John Killeen, William King, Eleanor Krkoska, Adele Laboranti, Thomas Laverty, Melissa Liput, Nancy Marriot, Dominic Mazullo, Kathleen McCusker, James McNichol, Margaret McTamney, Robert Munley, David Murnani, Sr., Bill Oberlander, Helen O'Rourke, Theresa Pasquarello, Merritt Pavloff, Frank Pingree, Thomas Quirk, Sr., Patrick Reich, Jack Robinson, Josie Schirripa, William Schleter, Robert Schwartz, Nancy Skalicky, Helen Steimer, John J. Stretch, III, Mary Suileg, Colin Tipping, William Tobey, Irene Toczylowski, John Tomlin, Joseph Tri, Genoeffa Trosini, John Urmson, Geraldine Walsh, The Watson Family, Regina Weinrich, Jim Whelan, Anna Marie Windle, Charles Yerger, Connie Yochum, Joan Zajdel, Aunt Carol and Uncle Jack

***Please pray for the requests offered on behalf of:***

Madlyn Abramson, Jane Auer, Frank Baldino, Ernie and Betty Beck, Elizabeth Bono, J. Carr, Mary Chevalier, Rick Chevalier, Gerald Clancy, Mary Condon, John Coogan, Ruth Degan, Cheryl Duca, J. Duriacova, Christine Florkowski, Joe and Laura Gartner, Bill and Carol Gates, Lillian Genuardi, Robert Glace, Robert Gove, Beth Hungerbuhler, Pam Ingram, The Jay Family, All Jesuit Novices of the Midwest USA, B. Lafferrerie, Agnes Leinheiser, Orlando Marcelli, Nancy Masi, Edly Massanga, Liz Maugle, Margaret McArdle, Marie McCrea, E. McDonald, Irma McGlone, Franl Murdock, Mr. & Mrs. Jim Murphy, Trista and Jack Nealon, Kristen O'Connor and Baby Lily, Zina O'Connor, Anne O'Donnell, Elizabeth Post, Palma Jane Rhodes, Ricci, Jack Serfas, Kathleen Serfas, Lauren Serfas, Madison Serfas, Thomas Serfas, Christine Xiou, Baby Grace Marion Zimmerman, and for all those diagnosed with Coronavirus.