

Sister Guillemette, Little Sisters of the Poor

Talking about the crisis as being in the past is a bit difficult; in some countries, our care homes are in the middle of the "battle", and even in France, residents are once again deprived of outside visits. However, we can already profit from past experience and draw some ideas for the future...

They were terrible weeks: Fear, increased by the news that was continually broadcast on the media; anguish at seeing a new case in the house; grief at the deaths, sometimes close together; the need, especially at the beginning, to "manage" in the face of the need for masks and over-gowns; enormous work overload with the scarcity of staff, due to covid or confinement, the quarantine of sick or tested positive Little Sisters, the impossibility of having the help of volunteers, the forced relocation of sick residents to a dedicated area of the house, etc... It is necessary to underline how much each one, staff or Little Sisters, has given the maximum and the best of themselves. In a few homes, employees have voluntarily confined themselves to the house, to continue their work without the risk of contamination from outside.

One of the greatest sufferings was not being able to accompany, nor provide spiritual help to the sick who died in hospital, without even having the right to see the bodies again before a funeral. A great trial was the deprivation of Masses and sacraments in many homes.

For the residents, the most painful was undoubtedly the absence of visits, and then the confinement in rooms. Some, more weakened psychologically, found it difficult to understand what was going on, such as a moving complaint from a resident priest: "I have always behaved well, I have done nothing wrong, why am I being punished? For our more fragile and elderly Little Elder Sisters, the necessary confinement in the community was often difficult to live with. Those who have been ill have suffered from the fear of dying, fear of infecting the caretakers; and since their recovery there has sometimes been a lack of appetite and strength.

We have tried to inform, explain, reassure and console. The service of meals in the room, while causing extra work, allowed personal encounters - even with distancing! The trust in the Little Sisters has greatly supported and kept the elderly safe. "We follow you", said one of them.

The situation has given rise to a lot of creativity, to keep in touch with the families, to propose activities, many and various. Televised masses were very well attended, with great fervour, the "Mass of the Pope" at 7.30 a.m., or the Mass in Lourdes... A group of young people, unable to come to the house, set up a "Radio Ma Maison", themselves preparing a small daily broadcast with a varied programme, diffused in the rooms... The use of modern communication techniques will certainly be continued, to the enrichment of the proposals of activities organisers.

The mobilization, the solidarity, of people from outside, benefactors and volunteers, whether regular or new, young people ready to "do something for the Elderly", have been and still are remarkable and of great comfort. We will have to work to sustain and develop this renewal of interest and affection towards the elderly, when the ordeal is over!

"Social distancing has made us even closer to the residents", noted one Little Sister, and this is something to be maintained! Listening attentively, for a better understanding of what can make the person feel alive, proximity in care and the most humble daily services are reminders for us all. .

The spirit of family, which is dear to us, and which must be constantly updated, seems to us to be an essential factor so that the elderly person, whatever their physical or psychological limitations, remains well "included", recognised and valued, and an actor in their own life. Moreover, in these difficult times, the residents have shown themselves to be cooperative, responsible and willing to help.

How touching and significant it was to hear these gentlemen from a house in Algeria, whom we thanked for their spontaneous services: "Sister, this is my home, this is my house, you don't need to thank me

The Little Sister in charge of a home in Paris

1-Living through these months of crisis and confinement as an institution :

Months of tension and constant vigilance to fight first against the arrival of the virus and then against its spread within the establishment.

Months of intense solidarity internally but also with neighbours, friends and the supervisory authorities (ARS and DASES).

Months of incessant questioning : Hospitalisation or care of the sick person at Ma Maison? Creation of a COVID zone or strict isolation of residents in their own room? How and what information should be communicated to the families and friends of the elderly? How best to support the care teams? How to facilitate the integration of the staff who have come in as reinforcements? How can we fight against the exhaustion of all those who are on the front line? How can we combat fear? How can we support the solitude of residents while limiting the risks?

Months of creativity to create links and life: activities in the corridors (quizzes, music), organisation to have personal time with each resident when meals are distributed in the room, multiplication of new means of communication with the outside world (skype, whatsapp).

2-How did the elderly experience these months?

For the elderly who have been ill: fear of dying, loneliness linked to isolation, comfort brought by the frequent and regular visits of carers and Little Sisters, anxiety over transmitting the virus to those who care for and visit them, difficulty in seeing all their visitors dressed as "cosmonauts", need to have news of the other residents and life in the house, more or less long recovery of appetite and physical strength.

For older people who have not been ill: suffering in the face of reduced contact due to confinement, fear of contracting the virus, joy of being able to go into the garden and meet (from a distance) other residents and employees.

For all :

Difficulties :

Difficulty in accepting this reduction of social ties and the loneliness it implies. Impatience to resume meals and activities together

Sadness at not having been able to accompany and say goodbye to the deceased residents

Difficulty in structuring one's time and keeping busy while staying in the same place.

Loss of physical autonomy due to confinement

Positive points

Awareness of the importance of the relationships that weave our lives and of the life that contact with carers, Little Sisters, brings. Awareness of the need for others and the strength of the bonds that exist.

Development of means of communication: Importance given to telephone calls, letters, development of links with relatives through whatsapp or skype,

For those who have the capacity and desire, a time to deepen their faith, to live even more in the intimacy of Christ; some have experienced confinement as a privileged time, a "prolonged retreat".

Time to marvel at the little things: a visit, a letter, a reading, a beautiful TV programme, the rebirth of nature...

Acknowledgement of still being alive

3- What are we doing, what are we planning to do to help older people find and implement a project that gives relish and meaning to their lives?

Active listening in order to discern and not to miss what is important to them; multidisciplinary collaboration in order to work with the person and bring his or her personalised project to life.

A lot of individual support to restore confidence in the face of outside life; there is need for reassurance when walking in the street, going shopping, finding oneself in a group of masked people.

Adjustment of activities to the wishes of the residents and multiplication of these: outings, physical activities, relaxation, films and documentaries, etc.

Development of talking spaces: outings in small groups, coffee/discussion, themed talking groups (proposed by the elderly), spiritual groups: gospel sharing, Hope group, etc.

Creation of a dream box.