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Covid-19: Prelate's Dialogue with Health Care Workers

Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz took part in the second edition of “Harambee Covid-19 Conversations,” a series of discussions among health care professionals from Africa, Europe and Latin America.

07/08/2020

On this occasion, the topic was “Christian responses to the pandemic.” Eight health care

workers from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Argentina, Ivory Coast, Italy, Nigeria and Spain took part in the discussion organized by the NGO Harambee-Africa International.

“Thank you for your reflections and information,” the Prelate said in his final words to participants, “and thanks especially for your work of service to the sick and their families. We have learned a lot listening to your experiences. It is clear that you have sought the bodily health of the sick, which is very important, but also that you have brought dignity to so many people. You have brought God’s love to many sick people and members of their families.”

Dr. Rose Segla is a gynecologist at the Wale Medical-Social Center in Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast. She informed the group that “the majority of Covid-19 cases are in

Abidjan, in the south of the country. You can enter or leave the city only with a safe-conduct pass.” She also stressed the need to provide special care for people who have lost their jobs or their sources of income. “In our country medical care is very expensive and there are endemic diseases like malaria which we need to continue treating. At Wale and other institutions with a Christian inspiration we are trying to assist people by reducing the expenses of the consultations, tests and medicines.”

Rafael Aragon represented Argentina. He is director of the **Hospital Solidario Covid Austral**, a center set up for coronavirus patients who have no access to medical treatment due to a lack of economic resources. He said that some of the fundamental values for a health care center with a Christian identity are “solidarity, compassion,

a vocation to service, and social responsibility towards those most in need.”

Ito Diejomaoh is the director of the **Niger Foundation Hospital** in Enugu, Nigeria. He informed them that “at the moment, the highest rate of infection is found in doctors and nurses, and many of them are afraid.” He said that the emergency department at the hospital is under great pressure and the temptation has even arisen to close it.

“Nevertheless, the reply by the personnel working there was unanimous: we will never leave the patients unattended.” The doctor added: “We will continue taking all possible precautions, but we want to make clear our commitment to the ideal that Saint Josemaria, who inspired our hospital, gave us: to always put the person at the center.”

The neurologist María Sánchez-Carpintero joined in from the **Hospital Universitario Infanta Elena**, from Madrid. This was one of the first public centers in Spain that received patients with the virus. The doctor stressed “the great dedication that I have seen among my colleagues.” The doctors there found it natural to spend a lot of time “at the side of patients without family members, besides providing the necessary medical care.” She also related how, in many cases, she and her colleagues were at the side of many patients when they were dying, “holding their hand, talking with family members, making the sign of the Cross on their forehead or other signs that helped them to feel closely accompanied.”

Dr. Nicole Muyulu took part from the Democratic Republic of Congo, a nurse and teacher in the **Instituto Superior de Ciencias de la**

Enfermeria (ISSI Nursing School), in Kinshasa. She said that Covid-19 is a very real and pressing problem in Congo, but “we will learn to live with it, just as we have learned to live with malaria and so many other diseases. From time to time there will be crises. What we want to pass on to our students and all the nurses is that we can never abandon the sick.” This is a “key factor in any educational center with a Christian inspiration.”

Felice Agro took part from Italy, the European country hit hardest at the start of the pandemic. Director of the Covid-19 Unit at the **Campus Bio-Medico** in Rome, he spoke about how some patients become discouraged and pessimistic with their disease. Together with the patients’ physical recovery, the personnel at the Covid-19 Unit also try to assist their emotional recovery. “In one case we knew that a person’s favorite dish

was *pasta amatriciana*, so we asked the kitchen to prepare it for him; another person had lost his glasses so we bought a new pair for him... Along with these little human touches, many of them were consoled when we organized things so that the priest could come by to visit them and bring the Eucharist.”

Ana Maria Perez Galan represented the management team at **Laguna**, the major hospital specializing in palliative care in Spain and the second biggest in Europe. It was founded in 2002 on the occasion of the centennial of Saint Josemaria Escriva's birth. Perez Galan stressed that “in this pandemic, many of our patients were the neglected sick, those no one wanted in the general hospitals since the options for curing Covid-19 were quite slim.”

During this whole time, she continued, “we have also tried to

assist their families so that no one had to die alone.” To do so “we have developed creative solutions, in which the sick person is always at the center. It required great effort from the whole team, but it was worthwhile.” The Christian response at Laguna, Perez Galan added, “has been to love each person, seeing in each one the living image of Christ.” Many volunteers also provided essential help, like Ines, “a medical student who came down with Covid, and once she recovered she devoted herself body and soul to caring for the sick 7 to 8 hours a day.”

Another person taking part from Kinshasa in Congo was Dr. Rene Lumu Kambla. The father of six children, he is a specialist in emergency care and director of the **Monkole Hospital**. He spoke about how Monkole began to receive Covid-19 patients two months ago at the request of the local authorities.

“We opened a treatment center for this specific pathology with 25 beds and quickly increased them to 32, including 8 for intensive care; given the current situation we will try to increase this number to 45 in the coming weeks. At present we have 126 Covid patients.” He stressed that “as Christians, we take care of these patients with the professionalism needed to cure them; but we also strive to give our care a human face, since the patient is not a case but a person who wants to be listened to. All the patients want to be seen as brothers and sisters.”

In his closing remarks, Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz referred to an expression used by Saint Josemaria (whose message is the inspiration for Harambee): “I see the Blood of Christ coursing through your veins!” For the Prelate, this needs to be the foundation for a Christian’s unselfish service: “We need to see Christ in the

other person, in the sick, in their family, in each person with whom we come in contact.”

“While the rest of you were speaking,” he added, “I once again recalled that reflection of Pope Francis in the extraordinary moment of prayer for the end of pandemic on 27 March. The Holy Father reminded us that we are all in the same boat, that we are all fragile but also important and necessary, each of us in need of comforting the other.” We are all important because “each person is an image of Christ.”