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Austral Solidarity Hospital: a Dream of Saint Josemaría

Thanks to the generosity of many people and organizations, since June 1 the Austral Solidarity Covid Hospital has been caring for gravely ill coronavirus patients without health insurance.

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Austral University in Argentina, with the help of the public health system and hundreds of women and men

volunteers, has recently opened this solidarity hospital to care for coronavirus patients without health insurance. It was built and equipped in two months on the university campus and currently has 44 high-tech beds, with the capacity to expand to 60.

When the regional vicar of Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia informed Pope Francis that this project was underway he received the warm reply: “I am happy to hear the news of what you are doing at Austral Hospital. Continue forward!”

The first patient received was 97 years old. Forced to leave Spain with her husband after the Spanish Civil War ended, she helped bring her family forward in her adopted country of Argentina. Her warmth and smile won over all the doctors and nurses. “She won the hearts of us all,” said Manuel Rocca Rivarola,

director of the Solidarity Hospital, after she received the happy news that she was now well and could be discharged.

The care given in the Solidarity Hospital isn't only physical. All the professional staff and volunteers accompany each patient and their families in both their human and spiritual needs, including the psychological difficulties that isolation can present. Clara, a volunteer nurse, says that being "hooded" to avoid contagion doesn't help give patients peace of mind and confidence, so they opted for a creative solution: "We decided to wear a picture of ourselves on front of our protective gear, to show what we really look like." She adds: "It seems to help patients a lot, since they arrive fearful and nervous and are met by people whose faces they can't even see. She also confessed that she herself had to overcome an

initial fear: “It’s a new disease and there is much we still don’t know about it. But we’re nurses and we’re here for that, so we try to pour ourselves out and do all we can for the patients.”

Amid the bewilderment and suffering caused by the virus, the staff tries to bring joy to the patients’ lives. For Enzo’s birthday, doctors and nurses organized a party with a big cake and sang “Happy birthday” behind the protective glass. Enzo appreciated being shown that he was not alone at “the time when one is going through the worst.” He then added: “I want to wholeheartedly thank the doctors and nurses for their care, and for all the affection they showed.”

Nicholas and Valeria smile as they look at their newborn baby and recount their story. Both are doctors at the Austral Solidarity Hospital and

both of them received the news of a positive Covid test report when Valeria was seven months pregnant. Their symptoms were mild and they knew the chances of infecting their daughter were slim, but the feeling of worry and uncertainty was always with them. Their daughter Sofia was born healthy amid the quarantine measures. After recovering from Covid, Nicolas returned to the Hospital to continue caring for the COVID-19 patients.

As the number of patients has increased, those caring for them have sometimes become exhausted. One of the nurses at the Solidarity Hospital confides: “Yesterday I cried for the first time in intensive care, when for a long time I had not cried at work. I have been a nurse for 20 years and I’ve learned how to separate work from emotional and personal concerns, but yesterday I broke down from tiredness.” One

patient after another, one procedure after another, constantly trying to provide the best care possible and training new nurses, with face shields getting foggy and one's strength reaching its limit...

But the sense of companionship among everyone working there is strong and they all try to support one another at every turn. One volunteer nurse says: "What I like most about what I do is how we try to care equally for the one who has the possibility of recovering and the one who doesn't. Yesterday we had a patient who was no longer responding to anything, so the therapist helped two of his children to put on protective gear and accompanied them so they could be with their dad and say goodbye. They were happy to see that their father's face was very peaceful. That's what true nursing is about: taking care of

all aspects of the person at every moment in their life.”

At the opening of the Solidarity Hospital in the presence of the President of Argentina, Lucas Niklison from the University Hospital told those present: “In 1974, during his visit to Argentina, Saint Josemaría shared a dream with a group of doctors and other professionals: to launch a hospital to further medical care based on empathy and compassion, quality and safety, focused on the person and helping patients and their families to understand the deep meaning of pain and suffering.” This dream has now come true thanks to the generosity of institutions, companies and families who have contributed to this solidarity project that puts the most vulnerable people at the center, and offers human and spiritual care amid the drama of coronavirus.

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