

# **FRANCISCAN SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH (FSJ)**

**CHENNAI - 16**

## **FSJ & THE COVID PANDEMIC**

### **Introduction**

The congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph has been always in tune with the founding spirit of our founder Bishop John Aelen in catering to the needs of the society especially to the marginalized and the most vulnerable women and female children . Under the guidance of the Superior General Rev. Sr. Arockiam and her team of sisters took strenuous challenging steps in reaching out to the most needy at this crucial time of Covid 19 emergency.

### **The Covid Pandemic – Tamil Nadu**

Covid 19 Pandemic had upturned the lives of the people of the entire state of Tamil Nadu with alarming news of casualties, making headlines. The continuous chain of lockdowns, starting from March 24<sup>th</sup> 2020 in Tamil Nadu had made drastic changes in the livelihood of the common people. The pandemic had affected the entire day to day lifestyle from procuring basic needs. The pandemic has decimated jobs and placed millions of livelihoods at risk. As breadwinners of the family lose jobs, fall ill and die, the food security was at stake, particularly the poorest people. With low and irregular incomes and a lack of social support, many of them are spurred to continue working, often in unsafe conditions which led them to get infected by the Virus thus exposing themselves and their families to additional risks. The Government of Tamil Nadu announced prohibitory orders and responded by undertaking various sanitation measures. Relief kits were distributed to people but it was just a temporary relief.

## **The Covid Pandemic and St. Thomas Hospital**

While the people suffered in this manner our sisters faced problems too. Our sisters in remote areas struggled a lot due to the financial problem and during the time of lockdown the convents depended on the Generalate for their needs.

The Congregation experienced many deaths of the elderly sisters who were not able to cope up with the Covid virus and succumbed due to the low oxygen levels and breathing difficulties. Many young sisters of our congregation got treated and resumed their activities. The Thomas Hospital was a boon in these pandemic times to us and to the people in and around Chennai City. The hospital was permitted by the State Government to treat Covid patients. So specialized equipment's, precautionary Covid medicines, Oxygen cylinders and other necessities were equipped. Innumerable patients were admitted in the hospital among whom the preferences were given to the most vulnerable as they were not admitted in private hospitals. There were many Government hospitals but due to the steady rise of Covid infection everyone was not able to get admitted.

In fact St. Thomas Hospital witnessed something unexplainable and something The hospital had never seen in its fifty years of existence. During the first wave of pandemic our hospital had treated hundreds of Covid patients but the intensity of the disease and the death rate was very low compared to the second wave of the pandemic. It was a very challenging situation for the hospital. During the second wave the entire hospital was used for the covid patients and very rarely non covid patients were treated. There was shortage of medical staff, medicines, oxygen and other infrastructure but somehow the sisters and the staff managed to make both ends meet. Our sisters and the staff under the guidance and leadership of Sister Dr. Rexline gave the patients the best treatment available wearing simple mask. The sisters themselves served food to the patients at regular intervals as there was storage of kitchen staff. The Thomas Hospital was at its best in serving the needy at these trying times. And it was moment of great strength to have a hospital of this kind to treat our sisters as well as others. Otherwise it would have been unimaginable to think of our senior sisters and their plight in getting proper treatment. In that way God had blessed us to save innumerable lives during this pandemic. The service rendered by our hospital during the pandemic was very much appreciated The

Archbishops, bishops, religious heads both men and women in Tamil Nadu, and the conference of Religious India, Tamil Nadu (TNCRI)

### **Covid Pandemic – FSJ Education Mission.**

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has caused an unprecedented crisis in all areas. In the field of education, this emergency has led to the massive closure of face-to-face activities of educational institutions in order to prevent the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact. Primary schools were closed in the state as early as 15 March. On 21 March, the Class 10 SSLC board exams were postponed to beyond April 14, which were due to begin from March 27. Students of class 1–9 were promoted automatically considering the closure of schools

Due to this situation education has changed dramatically, with the distinctive rise of e-learning, whereby teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. We have mainly two types of schools, Matric and Govt aided Schools. In the Govt aided schools, teachers and the non-teaching staff members received their payments regularly irrespective of the lockdown but for the matric, they are self-financed and since no schools were opened, no fees were collected and the heads of the institutions were not able to pay their staff members. As the lockdowns prolonged, the General Council headed by Rev. Mother Arockiam decided to hold an online meeting for all the heads of the FSJ educational institutions to know the details of the salary and the current situation of the challenging times so after the discussion and a thorough analysis of the entire FSJ Schools salary particulars, it was wholeheartedly decided by the General administrative body that a half 50% salary to be provided from the Generalate to all the schools. So the Procurator General Sr. P. S. Celia took note of the salary details of all the schools and transferred the salary amount for the staff from the month of April 2021 and it is continuing till date as the schools have not resumed fully

### **Covid 19 Relief Activities Through Out the Congregation**

Our FSJ sisters from different communities have got involved in various activities in helping the vulnerable sector in their respective Provinces and areas. We have also contributed considerably to the Covid 19 relief fund of TNCRI. The following are the activities undertaken by our FSJ Sisters:

1. JOSAC ( Joseph's Social Action Centre ) has identified 200 families in and around St. Thomas Mount such as Kalaignar Nagar , Mariapuram , Silver street , Mangaliamman koil street and Mathias Nagar . The beneficiaries mostly are domestic workers who work in malls, hotels, theatres who have lost their daily wages due to continuous lockdown .Relief Packages containing 10 kgs of Rice, 2 kgs of dhal, 1 litre oil, 1 kg sugar, 1 kg salt and spices like mustard, turmeric, garlic coriander seeds etc have been distributed with the help of volunteers in the area.
2. FSJ Sisters of St. Joseph's province under the leadership of the Provincial Sr. Stella Rathinam, has involved in distributing fresh vegetables and greens from our farms to the differently abled families in the Acharapackkam Hill area .
3. 150 Families from two villages namely Nemam and Uthamanallur , Diocese of Chingleput have been identified . Relief packages containing 5 kg Rice , 1 litre of oil has been distributed.
4. FSJ Sisters at Pakala Community have involved in packing food packets and distributing to the poor in their area on a regular basis.
5. FSJ Sisters of Bishop John Aelen Province under the guidance of the Provincial Sr. Angeline Vincent had provided relief kits containing 5 kg of Rice, 2 kg of Dhal and 1 litre of oil to 100 families in the Ceylon and leprosy colonies at Panjapur, Trichy
6. Lunch, tea and snacks have been given regularly from the day beginning of the lockdown to the scavengers of the Karumandapam Area, Trichy
7. Fsj Communities have also collaborated with the parishes in reaching out to the needy in the rural areas of the Trichy Province
8. In our North Province , the FSJ communities under the guidance of the Provincial Sr. Nancy , got involved in organizing various activities to enhance the much affected lives and livelihood of the rural villages .The FSJ community in Tundla engaged in providing food provisions for 25 families which will take care of their livelihood for at least a period of time.
9. In the Agra region the FSJ community in collaboration with the Catholic Diocese unit of social service called as Seva Samaj Samithi, reached out to 25 families by giving provisions for few weeks.
10. In Gangapur City, FSJ community distributed sanitary kit for 50 Adolescent girls. It is also engaged in supplying tea, juices and snacks for the 40 police personnel who are posted to regulate the situation during the lockdown. The community also got engaged with the Jaipur Diocese in providing livelihood provisions for 350 families through Jeevandhara Samaj Kalyan Samithi. Wheat flour, Dal, Oil and other sanitary kits were given to the villagers.

11. In all our Social Action Centres wherever the SHGs (Self Help Groups) are functioning, our sisters are giving counseling services to the rural women. Lack of livelihood requirements, joblessness, confinement to home etc... has disturbed the normal lives of these women. Our FSJ sisters are constantly in touch with them by providing counseling and other supports to these women to cope up with this critical challenging situation

### **Present Scenario**

The pandemic had changed the social scenario to a greater extent by demanding to follow the NEW NORMAL way of living by having masks and sanitiers wherever we go. There has been a steady decline in the Covid infections by the steps taken by the Central and State governments through vaccinations. At present most of them have been vaccinated and the situation has resumed to an extent. The Colleges and schools have been started for 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> standard extent. The schools have started for the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> standard students from September 1, 2021 but classes for 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> standards are functioning on alternative days and the children from standard 1 to 8 will begin their studies from November 1, 2021 onwards with all the precautionary measures. The boarding students who have been studying through online have started to study from the boarding but most of them are still in their homes as the classes have not fully resumed. In the matric schools the parents are paying the school fees in a meager amount due to their financial constraints. The Government has notified that the school managements should not be strict in collecting fees and if any complaint is lodged then strict action will be taken against the school therefore our matric schools are in a condition to sustain with the help from the Generalate till they are able to pay the salary to their staff.

### **Conclusion**

Though Corona Virus has not been eradicated completely, now and then there are cases of infection but here we have adopted ways to live with the virus through precautionary measures. The nightmare of long lockdowns and its emergencies is making history along the journey of human life on earth. But humanity has paved way in passing through the dark tunnels of the pandemic to a better tomorrow through loving care and presenting hope to the needy.

