

## **Experience of the Coronavirus in Korea**

Two weeks after the Coronavirus virus began in Wuhan, it began to develop in Korea and the number of confirmed patients increased rapidly. Despite the government's strong and proactive efforts, the number of confirmed patients increased day by day, and the demand for testing began to overwhelm the health-care system. The Government quickly shut down schools and institutions, and people were advised to avoid large group meetings. For the first time after 237 years in the history of the Catholic Church all Masses were cancelled.

The biggest change I noticed was the long queues outside pharmacies and a local mart each morning as people tried to purchase face masks. The government finally was forced to control the manufacturing and distribution of face masks in order to avoid speculators hoarding them and selling them at an exorbitant price. Starting from Monday March 9th each citizen was limited to receiving two face masks per week. While people were taking all the precautions necessary there was no panic buying. The greatest fear people had was the possibility that a family member would die and they would not have the normal funeral rites that are so important in our culture.

People expressed anger at the members of the Shincheonji religious sect as some 60% of those confirmed to have the virus were linked to that church. Some of these people had been to Wuhan and initially refused to be tested. This was the reason why Daegu where they had their main church was quickly filled with the Coronavirus. There was a shortage of medical facilities but then many volunteers from the medical profession came to help out.

Some of the stories during the outbreak really impacted me e.g. the 83-year-old grandmother with poor sight, who sewed 32 cotton masks by hand, and brought them to the City Hall. In her letter she said "There's nothing I can do or offer by way of help. My sight is poor and my hand-sewing is not perfect, but I made these with the hope that they would help our neighbors who need them."

A priest in a small city, who could not celebrate Mass with a congregation, placed on a chair beside the altar each day the name of one of his parishioners. After a month had passed, more than half the chairs of the church had the names of those for whom he had offered the mass.

There was also a person with a disability who collected one of the two masks he received every week. He put seven masks in a small bag, and left them in front of the police station with a letter. "I am embarrassed to share this because it is so small but I was encouraged to see many people making an effort to share what they have. Even though these masks are only a few, I am willing to share what I have with those who need them. Please accept them!"

Because I been assigned to Bangor I was very careful not to catch a cold. Four of our Sisters returned from China and I shared their quarantine with them. We also had a sister in the community who had recently undergone serious brain surgery. For two months before leaving Korea, meetings with family and friends were very limited. The worst thing was that I couldn't spend time at home or say a proper good-bye to my sick and elderly parents. The demand of leaving on mission made my family become missionaries before me.

I think that what the Coronavirus has taught us in Korea and probably everywhere is that we realize how insufficient our material goods and our abilities are. When it is over, perhaps we can experience again the joy of being together, knowing too that the Lord's presence welcomes us to greater life and joy through sufferings and trials. I think the sharing and caring for one another is in a sense a living out of Jesus command at the Last Supper: Do this in memory of me.