



Photo by Aristide Economopoulos

“Thanks to God That So Many
of Them Made It.”

SR. PRUDENTIA OSUJI, SC

Director of Pastoral Care

When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit, “it seemed like a nightmare,” says Sr. Prudentia Osuji, a Sister of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, who directs pastoral care at Trinitas. Staff didn’t entirely know what to make of it, asking themselves, “What is this all about?”

They didn’t know how bad it would be. “We thought, ‘Oh, we’re going to get over it. It sounds like a virus,’ until we were overwhelmed with the number of people coming in each day,” says Sr. Osuji. “We were running helter-skelter. What are we going to do? It was all hands on deck; it felt like chaos.”

The pastoral care team had to make quick choices around complex questions, including “Where do we go?” and “Which person do you visit?” “The phones were constantly ringing, calls coming in to alert us that ‘this patient needs attention’ and ‘this person is dying,’” recalls Sr. Osuji. “We were overwhelmed initially. It was hard.”

“Before you went in to see a patient, you had to wear the appropriate personal protective equipment, gowned up with the mask, with the shield, with everything,” says Sr. Osuji. “You didn’t know whether, when you went in, if you were going to stay safe. The feelings, the emotions were so high; you were scared, even.”

Each morning, the hospital generates a list of patients and shares it with the pastoral care office. Priests held Masses in the chapel, to pray for the sick and the deceased. The spiritual care providers went throughout the hospital to offer blessings, praying through the glass when they couldn’t enter rooms for fear of spreading the infection. “Most of the time we had to go to the morgue to bless the bodies; and the truck where the bodies were being carried away, we went there before they left with them.”

It is important to hospital staff to show respect for all who died. “We send everybody, every family, prayer cards to tell them we are sorry that they lost their loved ones,” she says. “They were so appreciative of it.”

Sr. Osuji lives in a convent with four other sisters who are in their 70s, though one is 91. She would run down to the basement after every shift at the hospital to change her clothes and wash up before she visited with the other sisters. They worried, too, but knew Sr. Osuji was doing what she could to keep the illness from spreading.

Over time, she says staff began to view the pandemic differently. “We were handling it with prayer and the conviction that God is on our side — we’re going to overcome it. Eventually, we started calming ourselves down, which was key.” She thought of the humanity of the patients and their families when she did her work. “It could be my father; it could be my

brother; it could be my sister. We started viewing it that way, and it would give us a little more strength to keep going.

“The nurses and the doctors and the caregivers, everybody, they were all standing with the patients and their families.” Chaplains called families to tell them patients were visited, and Catholic patients who were gravely ill received their last rites. Chaplains also tailored prayers for those of other faith traditions, and they let families know when patients were comfortable. “That gave them a lot of consolation,” she says.

Staff members also needed pastoral care because some employees died from COVID. Pastoral care team members visited with each department, prayed with them and shared their memories of the coworker who passed. “Our departments, they were all calling on mostly pastoral care to come and give us hope, give us strength and give us prayer.”

“The feeling of losing a loved one, that feeling was there for me also,” says Sr. Osuji. “My brother Martin passed away in Africa (of kidney failure) before the pandemic. I bought tickets to visit but I couldn’t go because of COVID and the lockdown. So my emotions were so high during that time.” She shared her feelings with the sisters, other friends and coworkers.

“People called me to say, ‘Hey, how are you doing?’ Masses were going on. That gave me courage and gradually we were able to let go of our fear. Thank God, it’s slowing down.

“This virus has been an eye opener to get yourself ready, to get myself ready, to make my prayer life more intense. Seeing the number of people who passed away, it’s unbelievable. It’s overwhelming. Our life is short; we don’t know the hour. So, it made me strong. It made my spiritual life stronger. I keep praying, keep preparing for what’s to come because we don’t know when it will come. I tell myself, ‘You have to be ready.’”

She expresses gratitude for the pastoral care team, other sisters and Trinitas’ leadership team. “Everybody had sleepless nights. Everybody was trying to see what we could do to help our brothers and sisters. They were brought in here, and some of them would not make it.” But “thanks to heaven,” she says, she was “so happy when patients would recover.” Staff would applaud and cheer. “Thanks to God that so many of them made it. That was the joy.”

— Betsy Taylor