

Quarantined B.C. couple relying on faith to get them through virus threat

The morning routine hasn't changed for Marichu and Ding Camales-Torrijos since they and all other passengers on the Diamond Princess cruise ship were quarantined following discovery of the coronavirus on board.

The couple has breakfast delivered by mask-wearing cruise staff, they listen to live updates from the captain about the spread of the virus, they send online messages to family and friends, and they pray.

"We start the day with prayer thanking God that we are symptom-free," Marichu told *The B.C. Catholic* on Feb. 13. The couple, parishioners at St. Matthew Parish in Surrey, boarded the ship for a Southeast Asia cruise 26 days earlier. It was a gift to Ding ahead of his 65th birthday.

They made stops in Vietnam, Taiwan, China and Hong Kong, when on the last day of the trip a case of the coronavirus, also called COVID-19, was discovered on board. The ship was placed on quarantine, docked in Tokyo, and anchored for the next two weeks. The couple don't expect to leave the ship until Feb. 19.

On Feb. 13, 44 new cases of COVID-19 were confirmed on board, bringing the total number of infected individuals to 218 of the 3,700 cruise passengers and crew.

"We are taking this in stride on a day-to-day basis," Marichu said.

The couple is confined to their 200-square-foot cabin during the quarantine. They must wear masks when their meals are delivered and during the single hour a day they are allowed to walk outside. The rest of the time they stay inside, praying, sending messages to other passengers through online chat groups, and trying to stay positive.



The Southeast Asia trip was a gift to Camales-Torrijos ahead of his 65th birthday. Canadian Catholic News

Marichu is unaware of any Catholic priests on board the ship, but as a lector, extraordinary minister of holy Communion and member of Couples for Christ at St. Matthew, she is trying to minister to her fellow travelers by offering an optimistic outlook.

When an elderly passenger was taken off the ship and sent to hospital for treatment, Marichu reached out to the man's wife, who remained on board. Through online messages, Marichu tries to provide comfort and encouragement.

"Without faith, I don't think I would last this long," Marichu said.

Vancouver Archbishop J. Michael Miller has called for prayers for those suffering from the virus.

"As Chinese health and political officials struggle to contain the virus, please pray that they see in the response of the global community a solidarity rooted in Christian charity. May God grant wisdom and healing as the countries of the world work to prevent a global epidemic," he prayed.

Although Dr. Bonnie Henry, British Columbia's deputy provincial health officer,

has said just four cases of COVID-19 have been discovered in the province and the risk of contracting the illness is low, some Catholic communities have taken precautions.

Rev. Richard Au, pastor of Canadian Martyrs Parish in Richmond, B.C., has obtained a dispensation from attending Mass for members of his largely Chinese congregation who have recently traveled to regions affected by the virus, have been in contact with anyone who might be infected, or are coughing or feverish. Those who do not attend Mass “must practice other forms of piety for an hour” such as reading the Bible or praying the rosary.

Since the announcement, Father Au has noticed a decrease in attendance at Sunday Mass, while the hand sanitizer dispensers are in high demand, as are the automatic door openers, with parishioner using their elbows instead of hands to push the button.

“Everyone has someone or has a connection” to someone in Wuhan, China, the epicentre of the virus, he said. The constant information and misinformation about new cases, compounded by fear, has led to parishioners showing up at the church “at nighttime, knocking on the door and pouring their hearts out and their tears out.”