

Sister Rezebeth Noceja: Defining providence in a pandemic

On Feb. 2, 2021, the Church celebrates the World Day for Consecrated Life. The occasion will include Mass, celebrated by Archbishop Richard Smith, and a renewal of the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. The livestream can be viewed on Facebook and YouTube.

In this column, Sister Rezebeth Noceja of the Sisters of Providence writes about defining providence amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Their ministries centre around health, education and social services and include Providence Centre, Providence Renewal Centre, Father Lacombe Care Centre, Providence Care Centre, Anawim – Food Bank, prison ministry, ministry with the deaf and community services.



Sr. Rezebeth Noceja

A conversation among our volunteers at one of our ministries in inner city Edmonton was around the definition of Providence. They asked, “what is Providence?”.

Some explained it is like divine intervention which becomes present at the most difficult times even without being asked for while others said providence is the answer to prayers which were intentionally begged for. It was interesting to hear their discussion.

As I write this article, I ponder on my own experience of providence during the past year and by extension render for us a definition of it.

It is January 2021 and looking back at the past year I marvel at how God has been good to me in all the complexities I went through. This included the fear of having contracted the virus around March last year which turned out to be a simple case of cold and flu.

With a ministry that was abruptly transitioned to work-from-home, I soon began to feel the privilege of still having a job amidst massive cuts from different sectors and having a secure home where I have all the things I need, safely distanced from possible virus carriers. Soon enough I felt a gentle yet persistent nudge to use this privilege to help those in need.

After a few weeks of being home-bound, my community and I started to wonder how we can be providence to those who are marginalized and heavily affected by the pandemic. Our local community, together with the Novitiate community, started volunteering at my workplace to deliver food hampers to immigrant and refugee families and seniors who are home-bound across the Edmonton area.

Aware of the risks we were taking, we drew inspiration from our foundress, Mother Emilie, and our Sisters of Providence who braved the typhus epidemic in the year 1847 and the cholera epidemic in the year 1849 that deeply affected the city of Montreal in Canada. The Sisters braved these plagues ministering to God's people with trust in Providence.



Sisters of Providence in Initial Formation share the gift of music together. Sisters of Providence

By the middle of the year, I had a ministry transition to full-time study online which proved to be very challenging in all sorts and form. I soon realized that the challenges I faced were shared by most students in my class.

My intuition says that the gravity of mental and emotional pressure experienced by students were associated with the restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is one thing to learn about critical social issues and social justice towards the achievement of a degree in social work; it is another story to do it without the necessary social interactions with peers and teachers.

Paradoxically, it is learning to be a social worker without being social. As I examine my own values as a Religious and how it may be in conflict with the demands of the profession, and as I learn about the theories behind social work and the plight of those in the margins of society, I myself am immersed in my own form of plight.

The rigorous demands of school, the social isolation I was not accustomed to, the expectations of community life, and my own continued discernment as a Sister of temporary vows created stress and pressure. Thankfully, I survived the first semester of the university program and with the occasional doubts about my own call, I am still here ... sustained and cradled by Providence.

At times when I felt like slipping away, Providence was faithfully and steadily grounding me. One thing I learned from the experience of online study is to be "intentional" about making connections with my classmates (though remotely) in order to form a good support in the learning process.

Much like religious community life, we have to be intentional about our community life if we want to thrive in our response to God's call. In the absence of tangible school community, I found learning companions in my local community members who had the experience and robust knowledge in ministry which is providential.

As the new year starts, I hope in Providence that is my ever-present companion in moments of joy as well as in moments of fear and doubt.

Read Sr. Rezebeth's testimonial on her first profession of vows here.

– This column by Sr. Rezebeth Noceja, S.P., Temporary Vows was originally published in the most recent Women of Providence in Collaboration newsletter