



Society of the Divine Savior
SALVATORIANS

Apostles for our times.

FRONT LINE FAITH

Fr. John Vianney Muweesi, SDS

Caring for Spiritual Health During a Pandemic



Nurses and doctors are hospital front liners dealing with the physical health of so many during this Covid-19 Pandemic. Who takes care of the spiritual needs of staff, their patients, and patient families during these unprecedented times? Fr. John Vianney Muweesi SDS, a Society of the Divine Savior priest, serves on the front line as a hospital chaplain at All Saints Hospital in Racine, Wisc.

His ministry, which has always focused on the spiritual and emotional care needs of staff, patients, and families, has had to adapt. Due to the virus, currently, he stays out of hospital rooms to minimize contact and unnecessary exposure for patients; ministry to patients is primarily via telephone calls. He only goes into patients' rooms where there is an absolute need for the spiritual or pastoral care of patients or families as circumstances dictate; for Catholic patients, this could be a need for the sacrament of anointing of the sick or

reconciliation. “My ministry is more of a personal connection, interactive approach; so, these restrictions have become one of my toughest challenges, more so as most of our patients by virtue of their medical conditions may not be able to answer phones,” he said.

He continues to reach out and connect by phone with isolated patients and their families who are unable to visit them. Medical staff often asks for the hospital chaplains to reach out to families, especially those who are overwhelmed or struggling to cope. When a patient is in critical condition, dying or deceased, the immediate family is allowed to come in, and chaplains are invited to support the families, using caution and exercising CDC guidelines.

“My level of fear and anxiety was high initially, especially when I had to put on the protective equipment and walk into rooms of patients with COVID-19 for the administration of the sacraments of the anointing of the sick or reconciliation as requested by Catholic



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patients' or family request," said Fr. John. "I have become spiritually stronger, embracing my Salvatorian mission to proclaim the Gospel through all ways and means possible. I recognize and honor the work of all the associates as a ministry, serving faithfully beyond a paycheck. I feel humbled and blessed to be able to participate and continue Jesus' healing and compassionate ministry for those I encounter."

HELPING STAFF

As a chaplain, Fr. Muweesi primarily supports the patients and families, but more than usual, supporting the hospital associates has become an essential part of his work and physical presence in the hospital. "Walking around, checking in, thanking and encouraging has become a daily part of my routine," he said. "Listening to workers who may be experiencing spiritual and emotional distress, or are feeling overwhelmed on the front line is an essential part of my ministry right now," he said. "As patients die, these front-line workers are also dealing with their fear of contracting the virus and spreading it to their families. The associates also feel the loss and grief for the patients for whom they care. Our presence and supportive ministry for associates are needed more than ever."

The main hospital chapel, as well as the interfaith prayer room, have been re-organized to be more welcoming for all associates regardless of their faith background. In the chapel, there is a designated meditation space for associates who want to take a short work break and seek sacred space. "Chaplains are also planning to reserve blocks of time during the week workdays, just for associates who may need to decompress or debrief, in a safe spot," he said. "We are calling this the 'Walk in Oasis' for associates.



BEYOND THE HOSPITAL

Fr. John resides with members of his Salvatorian religious community, including a senior priest, so protective measures expand to home as well. His routine has become compulsory, leaving his work jackets in the garage, heading straight to the laundry to wash his clothes from the day, and then directly to his shower. "As all families are worried about their loved ones, especially those on the front-line, mine are as well," he said. "But they are aware of and respect that this is part of the package of my priest and religious Salvatorian vocation."

[photo captions top-to-bottom]

~ Fr. John wears personal protective gear to visit patients.

~ Getting ready to make his rounds and offer support

~ Meditation room and a safe spot to decompress has been set up for staff