

**TESTIMONY ON COVID-19 PANDEMIC
AND
WITNESSING THE RISEN LORD IN BANGLADESH**
Fr. Joseph Gomes, OMI

Inspired by the spirit, knowing the outreach geographical location of the villages, illiteracy and the ignorance of our people, I felt the desire to do something immediately. With me were the Indigenous Leaders, Rt. Rev. Bejoy N. D'Cruze, OMI, Oblate Fathers and few other organizations. Therefore, we called for an urgent meeting with some of the local leaders at IPDS office in Kulaura, Moulvibazar on the 8th of March 2020.

1. The Strategic Plan that we have undertaken as safety nets and protective measures:

a. During the spread of COVID-19 we decided to be present with our peoples; to deepen their spiritual and moral strength, to give them proper orientation about Coronavirus Covid-19, to continue the sacramental and pastoral care with proper precaution and protection, to mentally prepare the leaders to face the worst case scenario; to distribute sanitary materials and to look for possible food assistance for the poor from different sources.

b. We thought of printing safety net measure leaflets according to the directions of the World Health Organization (WHO) both in Bangla and Khasi languages and distribute them to each village as quickly as possible. It was decided that Mr. Ross Pohtam would do the Khasi translation and the office of the Indigenous Peoples Development Services (IPDS) would prepare the Bangla version. Accordingly, it was done; printed and distributed into the villages.

c. The above mentioned persons had formed small teams and carried out Awareness Campaign in twenty- two (22) villages namely: Lokhipur village, Bongaon village, Marina Tea Estate, Gazipur Tea Estate, Meghatila punji, New Rangi punji, Balarma punji, Amoli punji, Purancholta punji, Jhimai punji, Singur punji, Islachora punji, Amchori punji, Balukoona punji, Puthicherra punji, Nooncherra punji, Ichachora punji, Panai punji, Kukijuri punji, Lutijuri punji, Muroicherra punji and Ewlachora punji. And I was present in most of the villages during this campaign.

d. The following areas were covered during the campaign:

- Distribution of leaflets: read out and explained to the people present.
- Proper orientation was given on what is Covid- 19 and some Precautionary Measures:
- Importance of the washing of hands for 20/30 seconds before entering into the house.
- Avoid coughing and sneezing in front of others.
- Importance of maintaining social distancing in order to avoid infection.
- Keeping a separate room available to isolate a person found with positive case.
- Quarantine for fourteen days for anyone coming into the village from a distant place.
- Restricting movements as much as possible to avoid community transmission.
- Importance of cleanliness: inside the house and around the village.
- Money handling: always wash hands thoroughly after every money transaction.
- Restricting vendors and business people coming into the villages during the lockdown.

2. Collaborative initiatives/ measures undertaken:

It was providential to meet with some of the generous institutions to organize collaborative initiatives to help out our peoples affected and victimized by Covid-19 in four districts under the jurisdiction of The Sylhet Catholic Diocese. Among them The Sylhet Catholic Diocese, the Oblate Delegation in Bangladesh, the Caritas Bangladesh, KUBORAJ Inter-Punjee Development Association, the Government Agencies, Indigenous Peoples Development Services and the Missionaries of Charity Sisters are worth mentioning.

a. Visit to the Hospital: In the midst of Covid-19 Soroj Leonard Costa OMI and Joseph Gomes OMI visited Mrs. Pronola Hagidok an Indigenous woman, a suspect of a murder cases, in Sylhet Osmani Medical College Hospital on April 15 & 17. She was pregnant, arrested and was put into Jail custody on October 15, 2019. During the first week of Easter her health condition was very critical in Moulvibazar Jail and was sent to the hospital in Sylhet. There she had a cesarean operation and gave birth to a premature son, one month before the due date. There was no one to attend her in the hospital because of the fear of Corona virus. Rt. Rev. Bishop Bejoy N. D’Cruze, OMI contacted with the jail authorities in Moulvibazar and Sylhet Jail and arranged our visit to the hospital. We took some nutritious food and clothes for both the new born and the mother in the prison cell of the hospital. After the safe delivery, the child and the mother are doing fine and were sent back to Moulvibazar jail. Together with her, four other women and two men suspected of murder were arrested and imprisoned. Because of the Corona Virus Pandemic the judicial activities are suspended for the time being. But we are trying our best to get them out of the jail on bail.

b. Measure taken by the Catholic Diocese of Sylhet: Fr. Soroj Leonard Costa, OMI procurator of the diocese and Fr. Joseph Gomes, OMI as accompanied Rt. Rev. Bishop Bejoy N. D’Cruze, OMI and assisted him during the pastoral visit in different parishes and during the distribution of food to the victims. Fr. Joseph Gomes, OMI was privileged to take Bishop to different places in his car as his driver was on leave and was stranded at home because of country wide lockdown.

c. Pastoral and spiritual care: Rt. Rev. Bishop Bejoy D’ Cruze, OMI carried out a Pastoral visit during the Coronavirus situation to most of the parishes, Sub-parishes, Religious communities and Diocesan Minor Seminary. These are the following places that the Bishop visited:

- Marists Brothers in Giash Nagor, Moulvibazar and there he met with two brothers.
- St. John’s Minor Seminary in Giash Nagar, Moulvibazar; there he met with Fr. Francisco Rizzu, the Rector of the Seminary.
- St. Joseph’s Parish in Srimangal, Moulvibazar; there he met with the Holy Cross Fathers, Holy Cross Sisters, RNDM Sisters and SMRA Sisters communities.
- Saestaganj Sub-Parish; there he met with Fr. Gabriel Corraya and the differently-abled children in the center.
- Church of Immaculate Conception in Lokhipur; there he met with the Oblate Fathers, Sch. Fidel Talabon, OMI, from the Philippines, Holy Cross Sisters, MC Sisters and SMRA Sisters. Bishop also visited two Khasi villages during this pastoral visit.
- Church of Divine Mercy in Barlekha; there he met with the Oblate Fathers and Maria Bambina Sisters.
- Church of St. Patrick in Jaflong, Sylhet; there he met with Fr. Ronald Costa, seminarian Biplob Kujur and some of the parish leaders. He also visited two khasi villages, inquired about their well being and prayed over the sick.



During this pastoral tour Most Rev. Bishop Bejoy D' Cruze OMI offered Holy Eucharist in all the parishes mentioned above and he met all the Priests and Religious in common and; found out of their well being in such kind of critical situation of lockdown. He also inquired about the well-being of all the parishioners living in distant villages. Many of them shared about their confined experiences in the houses. During this time, some Sister's community have observed their retreats, some others would do it soon and; some are having long hours of adoration in front of the Blessed Sacrament, praying for God's mercy during the time of Covid-19 Pandemic. Some of the Religious communities have taken charitable initiatives in a limited way to support very poor families with food grains irrespective of Cult and Religion. Bishop also met the Fathers separately in all the parishes and encouraged them to be mentally strong and try to be connected with the faithful at this time of difficult moment. He also encouraged them to attend spiritual needs of the sick and attend funerals, hear confessions and perform the sacrament of the sick if required with proper precautions. Bishop and I met the Divisional Deputy Inspector General of Police in Sylhet and sought his advice prior to his pastoral visit.

d. Sanction of monetary assistances for food sustenance for the poor families affected by the impact of Coronavirus Covid-19: food items are Rice and lentils. The parish wise allocated food grains that have been given are as follows:

- Church of St. Thomas', Mugaipar, Sunamganj: 800 kg. of rice and 80 kg. of lentils.
- St. Anthony's Church, Rajai, Sunamganj: 640 kg. of rice and 64 kg. of lentils.
- De Mazenod Church, Khadimnagar, Sylhet: 400 kg. of rice and 40 kg. of lentils.
- St. Patrick's Church, Jaflong, Sylhet: 640 kg. of rice and 64 kg. of lentils.
- Divine Mercy Church, Barlekha, Moulvibazar: 960 kg. rice and 96 kg. of lentils.
- Church of Immaculate Conception, Kulaura, Moulvibazar: 1760 kg. of rice and 176 kg. of lentils.
- St. Joseph's the Worker Church, Sreemagal, Moulvibazar: 2000 kg. rice and 200 kg. of lentils.
- St. Xavier's Church (sub-Parish), Shaistagonj, Habiganj: 800 kg. of rice and 80 kg. of lentils.

e. Some amount of money was sanctioned by Rt. Rev. Bishop Bejoy N. D' Cruze, OMI for the Awareness Campaign and distribution of some sanitary articles to the Tea Estate and Punji Peoples under Lokhipur Mission. Therefore, we bought the following Articles and distributed it among one hundred families in seven villages namely: Lokhipur village, Bongaon village, Marina Tea Estate, Gazipur Tea Estate, Balarma punji, Purancholta punji and Amoli punji. Detol mini soap 600pcs, Sanitizer 100mls 100 bottles and Face masks 200pcs.



f. IPDS initiatives: The Indigenous Peoples Development Services have allocated Tk. 600/= per family (Indigenous) for buying food items. Of which 130 families in Kulaura and another 90 families in Barlekha upazilla under the district of Moulvibazar will be distributed soon.

g. Upazilla Chairman A.K.M Shafi Ahamed Solman's personal initiative: He is an elected chairman of the Kulaura sub-district (upazilla) and he took an initiative to distribute ten (10) kg. Of rice, one kg. of lentils, one liter of soybean oil, masks and sanitizer materials on 3 April 2020 for 150 poor Indigenous families. This was distributed in Lokhipur Mission Auditorium & was organized by the Oblate Fathers and KUBORAJ Association. We are grateful to Mr. A.K.M Shafi Ahamed Solman for his generosity.



h. Food grains for street children: Rt. Rev. Bishop. Bejoy N.D’Cruze OMI and Joseph Gomes OMI distributed some food items to 50 street children in Sylhet Railway Station on April 26. This was organized by Bishop himself and was assisted by two Muslim volunteers who are very closely associated with the street children and are always ready to collaborate with the Bishop in this regard. The Children were very happy and excited to have some food items that would be shared with their parents and other family members. Heartiest thanks to Rev. Bishop for his loving concern for the street children in this time of crisis.



OMI Bangladesh Delegation Initiatives in response to Covid-19 Pandemic: The Oblate Delegation in Bangladesh renders services in four Dioceses basically among the Indigenous populations having no land rights. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the OMI Bangladesh Delegation Administration has been working to get some funds from various sources. With the amount gathered from various sources and with some support from Delegation, these are then distributed to our various mission areas and dioceses where we are working: Lama Parish in the Archdiocese of Chittagong: Tk 100,000.00, Alikadam also in the same Archdiocese: Tk 100,000.00, Katadanga in the Diocese of Rajshahi: Tk.100, 000.00, Mugaipar in the Diocese of Sylhet: Tk. 60,000.00 and Borelkha also in the Diocese of Sylhet: Tk. 40, 000.00. These will be used to purchase Rice, Dal, Oil and other food items and will be distributed amongst the needy ones. This is in close coordination with The Ordinaries of the Dioceses and the Parish Priests. We expect severe crisis of food that might cause severe famine in near future. Therefore, we look forward for more monetary support for our poor Indigenous population.

Latest Situation of Bangladesh: As of April 28, 2020, out of 64 Districts; 60 Districts have confirmed cases of Corona Virus bringing the total confirmed cases to 6500 with the death toll of 150. This is out of the 16 million total population of the country. The highest number of tests conducted so far was at 4000 as of yesterday. Experts believed that the month of May will be very crucial for the country.

In the course of spread of COVID-19 and witnessing the selfless dedication of many Doctors, Nurses, Health workers, volunteers and Law enforcement agency members I was more convinced and strongly inspired to dedicate myself to be physically present among the peoples at this moment of fearful situation. Many of those peoples were found positive with COVID-19 and some of them have died while rendering health service to the COVID-19 victims. Rt. Rev. Bishop Bejoy N. D’Cruze, OMI has been my enlightenment by his deep love and passion for the poor and sick. He has always encouraged me to go ahead accompanying with the peoples suffering from shortage of food and suffering of starvation caused by this COVID-19 pandemic.

Over and above all, the love of God for his people, the gift of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit is the driving force that has been generating strength in my heart and in many other people’s hearts to accompany the poor and the sick people at this moment of despair.

Submitted by:

Fr. Joseph Gomes, OMI
Lokhipur Mission, Kulaura,
Moulvibazar.