News



People lower the body of a man who died of COVID-19 into a grave at a cemetery May 3 in Ahmedabad, India. (CNS/Amit Dave, Reuters)

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Amid thousands dying daily of COVID-19, even in rural areas of India, the pandemic has taken a heavy toll on church leaders.

Dozens of priests, scores of nuns and hundreds of laypeople have died during the second surge since mid-April.

Bishop Basil Bhuriya, 65, of Jhabua became the first serving bishop victim of COVID-19 when he died at St. Francis Hospital at Indore May 6. Retired Archbishop Antony Anandarayar of Pondicherry died of COVID-19 May 4.

"We lost a young bishop ordained only five years ago," Archbishop Leo Cornelius of Bhopal, who heads the Madhya Pradesh Council of Catholic Bishops, told Catholic News Service May 7 while returning from the funeral of Bhuriya.

Though Bhuriya had been treated in different hospitals for more than three weeks and had tested negative for the virus, Archbishop Cornelius said, he had a problem with oxygen levels and died of a heart attack due to the impact of COVID-19.

"We could not take his body to Jhabua [100 miles away] and so, he was buried at the [Divine Word] cemetery near Indore," he added.

"I have lost one of my young priests, two nuns and over three dozen Catholics," Cornelius said of the Bhopal Archdiocese, which has more than 15,000 Catholics. "Most of them died [because of] failure to get hospital admission on time and erratic oxygen supply in the hospitals."

The first big headline with the deaths in the church came April 17, when five Jesuits died in different parts of Gujarat state. This was followed by the death of 14 priests due to COVID-19 in different parts of India April 19-23, Matters India reported.

Among the dead were former vicar generals and provincial superiors of different congregations and nuns working in Catholic hospitals and other institutions.

On April 25, Msgr. Prasan Pradhan, vicar general of Bhubaneswar Archdiocese, died of COVID-19.

The Thrissur Archdiocese was stunned when half a dozen retired priests died of COVID-19 during the May 1-2 weekend. All of them were infected at the archdiocesan convalescent home, situated in the compound of archdiocesan medical college.

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Redemptorist Fr. Mathew Abraham, director general of Catholic Health Association of India, told CNS, "Due to shortage of oxygen and ventilators, several of our hospitals are not able to treat COVID patients."

"Some doctors and nurses are not willing to work [in] the COVID ward. Hence sister-doctors and sister-nurses are working throughout the night and day," said the priest, who had been hospitalized and has recovered from COVID-19.

Several state high courts have criticized federal and state governments for failure to provide adequate oxygen supply for hospital patients.

The government death toll passed 3,920 May 6. Media reports say the government death toll is underreported because it excludes counts from cremation grounds.