Sisters Nilza dos Santos and Jacinta Mahakwe described the situation at our mission in Salvador, where MMM runs Projeto Consolação (Project Consolation). The programme aims to support families that have experienced violence, including assassination of members, mainly in northeast Amaralina and its surroundings. Activities include visitation of bereaved families and community art therapy classes in which women feel free to share their stories. Sisters and staff promote well-being and a culture of peace in the community and schools.

In Brazil, the first cases of COVID-19 were in people who had travelled abroad. The greatest fear of local authorities is that the virus will reach the peripheries, where there is poor sanitation and overcrowding in people’s homes.

The Sisters said, ‘In Salvador, isolation began on 18 March with closure of schools and universities, when there were already confirmed cases in the city. Local authorities encouraged suspension of all meetings and public gatherings and for non-essential services to close and use home offices instead. That day the Conference of Bishops suspended Masses with people present.

‘On 19 March, following the recommendations of church leaders and local and state authorities, we closed our Project Consolation activities that would bring us into contact with the public and made major adjustments in our routine. The majority of our clients are elderly women and are at greater risk of COVID-19 than most people, so we have found creative ways to reach out to them. These include:

- Listening to their conversations through WhatsApp groups in which people can share their concerns and worries. Our private lines are always open for calls and chats and this has been helpful. We offer words of encouragement and practical ways to stay safe. Most are slipping back into depression and they feel better knowing that someone is ready to listen to them.
- Holding online lessons on crafts, such as painting and designing of tea towels and shirts. This keeps them busy and distracted from the tense atmosphere.
- Providing meals for those who need them. We offer lunch twice a week to the old people in our neighbourhood who do not have help available.
- Taking elderly people to designated health centres for vaccination against influenza. The government decided to advance the annual flu vaccination campaign in light of the COVID-19 situation. The campaign began on 23 March.
- Making face masks for distribution to the poorest households.
- At our daily evening prayer we expose the Blessed Sacrament for one hour. In silence we offer the sufferings of the people, especially the most vulnerable, to God. We pray for those with COVID-19, medical personnel, political leaders, family members, friends, our MMM Sisters, Associates and benefactors.

‘We only go outside for shopping and other essential needs.'
These changes have not been easy and there are fears that health systems will collapse because of:

- Fragile health facilities because of budget reductions;
- Political crises and differences between the state governors, who recommend social isolation measures, and the president, who disagreed, predicting detrimental consequences for the economy.
- Divided public opinion: some people are following the preventive measures set by state and city leaders; others are following the president’s advice.

‘The national government plans to pay an average of USD 150 per month to families that work informally. Credit in banks has been offered to employers so they will not dismiss their employees.’

‘In the midst of this chaos there is solidarity and a great call for being in communion with each other through prayer and checking on each another. Neighbours who were not previously close to us have asked for our phone number so they can find out how we are coping.’