

# Unwavering Spirit

## A nun's journey through breast cancer



When someone dedicates her entire life to serving the less privileged, even life-threatening health conditions cannot shake her resolve. That was exactly the situation when Sister Veronica Maria learnt she had breast cancer. Her devotion to the less privileged gave her strength to overcome her tough battle.

The resilient survivor from Hyderabad shares her story with **Sharmistha Maji**

A typical day for Sister Veronica Maria starts with gently helping senior citizens out of bed, assisting them with their morning routines, and accompanying them on short walks. Once the residents are cared for, she turns to her administrative responsibilities at Little Sisters of the Poor, an elderly care home in Secunderabad.

What is remarkable is that even after being diagnosed with breast cancer, her daily life and devotion to service remained much the same.

As we sit down in the home for a conversation on her cancer survival, I honestly expect it to be an emotional one. But instead, I am quite pleasantly taken aback by her positivity.

She recalls, "I did not panic nor worry. In fact, I had no time to think about cancer and get bogged down by it, because I have loads of work at the elderly home. So, I would just rest for 1-2 days after the chemo sessions and then get back to work."

"I believe one should continue working even when we are sick. If we just lie down thinking it's the end of the world, that's when more problems arise. I was very happy to remain busy with my daily duties," says Sister Veronica, with a peaceful, almost calming smile, in a conversation with *Pink*.



*Sister Veronica shares a warm smile with an inmate at the Little Sisters Of The Poor. Every inmate's face instantly lights up the moment they see her*

Her words instantly remind me of a chapter in the global bestselling book—*Ikigai: The Japanese Secret To A Long And Healthy Life*. The authors find that one of the biggest secrets behind the longevity of a Japanese community is that they never retire. They continue working throughout their lives, which gives them a sense of purpose, keeping them fit.

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The book also mentions how the famous artist and founder of Studio Ghibli, Hayao Miyazaki, went to his workshop to paint everyday even after he had officially retired. Continuing to lead a purposeful life probably helps people like Miyazaki and Sister Veronica to retain their sanity, regardless of circumstances.

#### **The diagnosis**

In February 2025, Sister Veronica noticed a lump in her breast. She first consulted Dr Evita Fernandez, a well-known

gynaecologist and a long-standing patron of the Little Sisters of the Poor, who advised mammography and an ultrasound-guided core needle biopsy. When the investigations confirmed malignancy, When the investigations confirmed malignancy, Dr Evita promptly referred Sister Veronica to Dr Raghu Ram.

The 55-year-old nun recalls, “Dr Raghu Ram carefully explained the results of my investigations and arranged a staging PET scan. He spent considerable time counselling me about the treatment plan, and his humane, empathetic approach was reassuring. Fortunately, the cancer had not spread elsewhere in my body. As the tumour was hormone-receptor negative (ER and PR negative) and HER2-positive, he explained that I would require chemotherapy along with part of the anti-HER2 therapy before surgery (neoadjuvant therapy).”

She was advised to undergo eight cycles of chemotherapy, followed by a mastectomy with removal of lymph nodes from the armpit (axilla), radiotherapy to the chest wall, and a one-year course of anti-HER2 therapy (trastuzumab). This comprehensive, step-wise treatment was aimed at eliminating the aggressive cancer cells and significantly reducing the risk of recurrence.

What was her initial reaction after it was confirmed that she had breast cancer? “I was not shocked at all and fully prepared. I have been tending to sick residents here for several years. Due to the nature of my work, I had a strange fleeting thought in 2024 that I might get cancer. I was feeling some tightness in my arms and couldn’t sleep one night,” she explains. This was one year before her diagnosis.

Normally, people would not be so unperturbed by a life-threatening disease, but for someone whose life is firmly anchored in a greater purpose, nothing could shake her spiritual outlook. Her approach was pragmatic and philosophical. “We are all eventually going to die someday. So, I always accept whatever God sends my way. Even when breast cancer was confirmed, I remained calm. But my sisters here (at the elderly care home) and my family members were worried,” she recalls.

Sister Veronica comes from Kerala, where she grew up in a family of eight sisters and one brother. There was no history of cancer in her immediate family, except her paternal uncle and his daughter, who had throat cancer and breast cancer respectively.

Though her administrative work at the old age home is largely a desk job, she has been following a fairly healthy lifestyle too—with timely meals and simple physical activities. Her

physical activities involve going on multiple rounds across the facility through the day, meeting and greeting the elderly residents and helping them with their daily activities, such as bathing. As a nature lover, she also enjoys gardening.

### **Belief in the Almighty**

For a nun serving in a charitable organisation without any income, cancer treatment can be unaffordable. Yet she believes that God always sends angels to help, especially in recognition of the unconditional service they provide.

“We look after the poor elderly people here for free without charging them anything until death, since we believe in divine providence. By God’s grace, we have never lacked for basic needs—even for a single day. We simply write our requirements on a blackboard outside, and people respond with extraordinary generosity; someone always comes forward to provide what is needed,” she says.

In the same spirit, her cancer treatment was also supported. Dr Evita generously paid for her chemotherapy and radiotherapy, while Dr Raghu Ram waived his professional fee and extended a substantial concession on her surgical costs at KIMS Hospitals. “He told me, ‘We will treat you as family.’ He and his entire team were compassionate, encouraging, and deeply supportive, giving me immense strength and courage throughout my journey,” she recalls.



*A figure of solace: Sister Veronica with a group of residents at the home for the elderly*



L-R: Dr Raghu Ram, Sister Kathleen and Sister Veronica

The Trastuzumab injections (anti-HER2 therapy) were also prohibitively expensive. Eight of them were generously sponsored by Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation through Dr Raghu Ram, while the remaining eight were funded by Dr Evita.

#### Treatment days

Sister Veronica's first chemotherapy session was held on March 26, 2025. By the 14th day, she had lost all her hair. "But I was thinking it's easy for me to take a bath now. For my hair needs relatively less water and soap," she points out with a laugh. Her hair loss didn't affect her as much as it might have, since she wears a coif and keeps her head covered with a veil at all times. As a result, her bare head is never visible.

However, the first two chemotherapy sessions were accompanied with side effects like severe body pains, drastic drop in BP and nausea. During that difficult phase, she found solace in the presence of her family and other nuns.

"My sisters, brother and sister-in-law came from Kerala to support me during those days. They stayed with me on rotation for 21 days, as I needed help with bathing. They left only after the drains were removed following surgery, and I could take a bath on my own. Even after they left, all the sisters here looked after me so well. I am truly grateful for having my family members and sisters by my side at such a time. In fact, some of them are nurses, so they knew exactly what needed to be done," she recounts.

#### 'Compassion is highest form of worship'

Sister Kathleen, who leads The Little Sisters of the Poor in Hyderabad, has devoted 48 selfless years of her life to loving service, guiding this home with compassion, humility, and unwavering faith. She is truly a living embodiment of grace in action. I was blessed to be involved in Sister Veronica's care—a breast cancer conqueror and an angel who herself has spent a lifetime serving others at this home for the elderly. Also, I consider myself deeply fortunate to have been given the divine opportunity to contribute, in a small way, to this sacred sanctuary for the aged. I firmly believe that compassion is the highest form of worship.

**Dr P Raghu Ram**



Little Sisters of the Poor is a charitable home in Secunderabad that provides free care for elderly individuals from economically weaker sections—right until the end of life, including their burial. Established in 1903, the home runs entirely on donations. Supporters can contribute through monetary aid, groceries, kitchen essentials, or by sponsoring meals.

Fortunately, from the third chemotherapy session, her body had started adjusting well to the treatment and she didn't have any major issues.

"So, I got back to my duties as usual. All the sisters here were saying—first time we are seeing someone with cancer doing their regular work instead of resting," she says with a smile.

After her chemotherapy sessions ended, she underwent a mastectomy with axillary lymph node clearance on September 17, 2025. She was discharged the following day and advised to avoid lifting heavy objects. Her post-operative recovery was smooth, and she was able to resume her normal duties within the same week.

#### Life after cancer

Sister Veronica did not have any diet restrictions, during or after the treatment. But she was asked to wash her fruits and dry fruits thoroughly before consumption.

"I was happily eating whatever I wanted to. But I was avoiding direct activities with the elderly to avoid infections from spreading, and I was wearing a mask for those few days. But we are like a big family. So, every time they would see me, they would say—we are praying for you, don't worry. This kind of support made everything seem easier."

After her surgery, she underwent five weeks of radiotherapy to the chest wall, which ended in October 2025. Today, she

is free of cancer, and back to her normal life serving at the elderly care home. "I can even move my arms comfortably now. I am feeling good. I never feel sick," she says.

**We are all eventually going to die someday. So, I always accept whatever God sends my way. Even when breast cancer got confirmed, I remained calm. But my sisters here (at the elderly care home) and my family members were extremely worried, says Sister Veronica**

As we wrap up our conversation, Sister Veronica walks me through their facility. On the way, we meet many elderly women and men, who greet us with the most cheerful smiles. Everyone's face instantly lights up the moment they see her. It seems like her presence and aura are unmistakably reassuring for them all.

Before bidding adieu, she leaves behind a message for anyone facing illnesses—"Don't ever focus on the sickness. Just take it positively and believe you will overcome it. Never give up, God is above all." ■