

Some Thoughts While in Quarantine

by Fr. James Lloyd, CSP

Each morning my alarm clock shocks me awake and springs me off my chaste couch. I sleepily go through my daily routine. I say, “Good morning,” to the Lord. I shower. I make the bed. I stagger to the chapel for the daily Mass, trying desperately to concentrate on more than remembering my full name. Then breakfast with a group of priests in roughly the same condition, some of whom valiantly try to move us to a more “cheerful” emotional space, usually unsuccessfully. The stiff upper lip and “all that sort of thing.”

The day is mostly solitary. We eat together six feet apart making conversation difficult even with raised decibels. Overall we resemble the eighteenth century Carthusian who lived his day by himself with the Lord. I read. I pray. I write. I exercise. I nod off a lot. I play some bridge games on the computer. I talk on the phone to my clients who are terrified in the crisis. I clean and re-clean my room and my office.

There is much time for wondering and speculating. There is darkness and light. I think of Viktor Frankl and his insights as to meaning. What is the meaning of this eerie experience? This strange World where I have never been before? Is the Lord telling me something? Something I know and don’t know at the same time. What really matters?

How empty movies and plays and pretentious lectures and clothing and impeachment and status and gadgets and so much of life’s frufru seem right now! But I sense another kind of emptiness. A meaningful kind. — I am to be alone and silent and still. I am to say nothing. I am to let my God love me. I am to let my God look upon me. That is all. I am to “be” — in a space in which Another Voice may speak.

Paradoxically, the more I and others become aware of the great “Other,” the more we seem to become aware of others. He will somehow message me His Will. For example: In my 72 years of living Community life, I have never seen such support and concern and service as I see in this Crisis. At each meal, the whole Community (usually about 20–21) is served at table by the President of the Paulist Fathers, who wears surgical gloves and mask. Assisted by the Vice President, he serves us with individual plates — as if in a ritzy restaurant. They are our waiters!!! “The first shall be last” We are offered good wine and politely asked our wishes. But their actions speak light years ahead of perfunctory anodyne good manners. This is way beyond the forced laughter of the socially adept. They are concerned for others. There is no talk of making the opening curtain for the latest hit show on Broadway, but only words of service and support for the “troops.” And especially for the “halt and the lame and the elderly.” “How can I help?” they ask. “Do you need or want anything?” It is heart warming and inspirational. It is what one imagines to be the will of the Lord. Is this part of my role in COVID-19??? Am I being told on the 19th hole of my life that it is Love that matters? Every thing else is dross and dung?

Similarly, the other night at table, sitting opposite me, Fr. K., 89 years old and Silver Star recipient for valor, suddenly toppled from his chair hitting the marble floor with a great thud and causing a massive blood flow. The Community at table, almost to a man, rushed to focus on the fallen warrior. A pillow for his head. The call for the EMS. The anointing of the bleeding priest should he not survive. The comfort offered to the bewildered old cleric on the floor. Utterly surrounded by brotherly concern (for the most part, since a tiny minority saw a dish of ice cream more important than Fr. K.'s trauma).

And for some mystifying reason, my computer went on the blink — kaput!!! A terrifying prospect for one (me) in isolation!!! The President of the Community, hobbling on a cane from a recent bicycle accident, comes to my little office, tugging a new monitor with him, fixes it all and moves on. With grace and skill he not only does a great job for me but teaches me a deep lesson of the meaning of the “OTHER” and making me aware of the beautiful dimension of “Community”: *Ecce quam ... jucundum habitare fratres in unum*. [Behold how ... pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity (Psalm 133:1)]. Or how to be grateful for one's blessings. ... It could be so much worse. ... On and on it goes.

Obviously God can develop good outcomes even in horrific and tragic situations — like COVID-19.