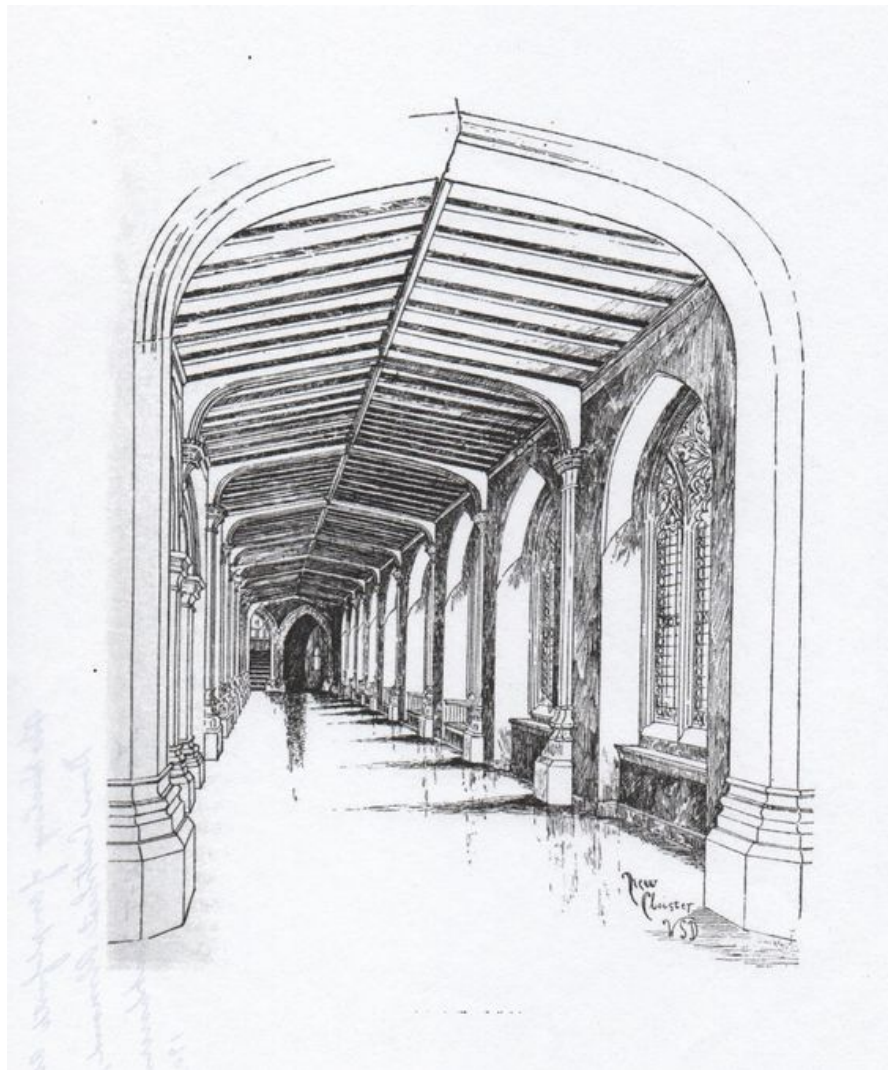


Wisdom from the Cloister

*Reflections from Anglican Religious to help us
during these times*



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What the Religious Life has to offer us in these days

Fr Peter CSWG offers his reflection on the current Coronavirus pandemic, and what the Religious Life has to offer.

The whole world has been brought to a standstill in a matter of days. Do we see in this the hand of God? The Church, in the person of Pope Francis, prayed: 'Save us Lord we are perishing.' We rightly turn to the Lord in faith, but rather than blame: 'Do you not care?' ... can we recognise, perhaps we have something to do with this crisis?

After all, we have enjoyed material wealth and economic gain, and in self-contentment taken much for granted, despoiling His creation, and putting the future of the planet in jeopardy, whilst neglecting the poor and vulnerable of the world. Can we truthfully say: *not my fault?*

When scientists point out that all four recent epidemics – Ebola, Sars, Mers and Covid 19 – were 'zoonotic' (disease able to transfer from animals to humans): and that depriving the animal world of its natural habitats, causing overcrowding and the erosion of natural 'buffer zones' between animals and humans, may facilitate pandemic viruses, can we still say we are blameless?

Two striking images of recent weeks remain dominant: one is of selfless nurses, doctors, supermarket employees, emergency service workers, and volunteers across the country, serving the community; the second is of panic-buying, emptying the shelves of food, even of rice and pasta allotted for the beneficiaries of Food Banks. Severe testing exposes the best and the worst in us: can we embrace the first, and leave the second behind? It is *our* choice.

Silence, stillness, solitude, slowness – all normally features of enclosed monastic life – now descend on the entire nation. Given for monastics to attend to what God is saying, can we all open our ears to listen, and if not to Him, then at least to our conscience and better instincts?

What has characterised life in 'lockdown' – self-discipline, a certain isolation and self- distancing – asks to be built into our future life together: we are all interconnected, dependant on one another. Then we will be able to respond more readily to the cry of creation, and with deeper care and respect for our fellow human-beings, especially those vulnerable.

We cannot return, we *must* not return when the clouds lift: the message is clear, and we have been given silence, stillness, solitude, slowness to take this on board. God is well able to end this pandemic, as He stilled the storm on the lake with a word, but are we ready for that?... to turn to Him? Or will we choose simply to revert to what was before? The pressure for that will be enormous. Are we prepared to change what needs to change, to live in a way more harmonious with creation and one another?

*Father, hear our cry to you: forgive what we have been
and help us live in ways pleasing to you,
in how we treat our fellow humans and your holy creation;
raise us from our former way with its culture of death
to live in the Way of your Son Jesus Christ, Amen.*

Fr Peter CSWG is a member of the Community of the Servants of the Will of God on Crawley Down. Their website is: <https://servants-of-the-will-of-god-cswg-monastery-of-the.business.site>, he is also Chairman of Religious of Orthodox Tradition (RoOT)

Christian Isolation

Fr Nicolas Stebbing CR writes on how we can use the current restrictions on movement to improve our spiritual life.

The great French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, said: "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." The Psalmist said: "Be still and know that I am God." Can we take these truths to ourselves during this time of the Coronavirus isolation?

This is very much against the culture of our time. We want to be busy. We must have full diaries. We need to be out and about at night enjoying ourselves. Admittedly we do also spend a lot of time alone, but on our computers, or phones, checking Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp or watching TV. Is this how we are spending this time of isolation? Can we do better than that and maybe learn from centuries of monastic wisdom where silence, being alone, being still is central to the life? Here are some tips:

- Welcome the experience. Don't fight it. See it as an opportunity and see what you can learn from it.
- Doing nothing is good. Don't feel guilty. Fields need to lie fallow to recover their fertility. Human beings need recreation, rest, holidays if they are going to perform well at work. So use this time to do nothing: look out of the window and watch the world go by; sit in the garden and look at the flowers and the insects, especially now it's spring; make a cup of coffee and sit still and enjoy it instead of gulping it in between other things. Take time to enjoy food, a glass of wine, even a gin and tonic!
- Some time with emails, Facebook, TV or other kinds of communication is good for keeping in touch, but don't spend too much time on it. Ration it. It becomes obsessive and unbalanced. It often fills our minds with trivia, unhelpful gossip or fears.
- Read the Bible, read a devotional book, pray. You probably do this anyway but we all tend to do this in a rush. Now we have the chance to take time, settle down, know that God is God. We have time to listen to God. We have time to let God work quietly in us. We can let God be God.
- If you are sharing this time of isolation with others don't be together all the time. It's OK to go to your room, to seek solitude. You will then have something to share when you come together and you will avoid occasions of impatience, frustration and sin.
- Remember you are part of the Body of Christ. That is not just other Christians around you, praying; it means literally that you are in the mystical body of Christ. Christ is with you all the time. You are not alone. Just as blood circulates in a body keeping the whole body alive, so the Holy Spirit is constantly moving between us keeping us alive in Christ, and alive together.
- Remember those like doctors, nurses, food providers who are working terribly hard. Remember those in prison, or illness, forced into isolation. Pray for them out of the frustrations of your isolation and share with them your knowledge that God is here.

"Be still and know that I am God."

Fr Nicolas Stebbing CR is a member of the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield. For more information about the life of the community please visit: www.mirfield.org.uk

Use of Time

Brother Joseph Emmanuel SSF writes about how we can order our days better.

When I was approached to contribute to something entitled 'Wisdom from the Cloister' I was tempted to ask to have the title changed! Like many people at the moment I don't feel particularly wise; I don't feel in the least 'in control' and, like many people, I find myself worrying not so much about myself as about loved ones from whom I am separated and friends who, by virtue of their occupations, find themselves on the 'front line' of our global struggle against the Corona Virus. I say this at the outset because I want to offer this short reflection on what aspects of Religious Tradition might say to the current crisis as someone who is very much attempting to make sense of this new world in which we find ourselves; I do not claim to have any let alone all of the answers!

Time

One of the first things one realises when coming to live in a Convent, Friary or Monastery is that routine, rhythm and a set timetable (horarium) are the warp and weft of life. In my own Friary every day follows exactly the same pattern (with some minor adjustments) with five times of worship (Morning Prayer, Midday Prayer, the Eucharist, Evening Prayer and Compline) being augmented by two periods of silent prayer, two work periods, three meals and one period of recreation. On one level that might seem to be rather monotonous and perhaps even constraining but the routine and rhythm of the horarium has much to commend it: there's time to spend time with God; time to get things done; time to be with each other and time to relax. In the current world of 'Social Distancing' many people have been deprived of their own 'horaria;' the 'usual' routines of everyday life (dictated by work, socialising, family time, recreation and rest) have been replaced by solitary working, no socialising, limited family contact and often little obvious structure. This, I know, is difficult for many people and the first thing I wonder is whether the idea of an intentionally structured day, with times set aside for prayer, work, study and recreation might offer us something as we navigate this new and uncharted territory?

Silence

Another very obvious feature of Religious life are times of intentional silence. Some people might see silence as simply an accidental lack of noise but, traditionally, periods of silence are laid down in order to remove external distractions from our still, silent and intensively active God whose presence surrounds us and nurtures us as a child is nurtured in the safety of the womb. This sort of intentional silence is eminently achievable in the context in which Religious live but would, I suspect, be rather harder to achieve in a 'normal' home environment. I wonder, however, if this might translate to not being afraid of silence(s); of welcoming them when they come rather than seeing them as threatening spaces which must be filled at all costs? On another – but interrelated – subject... We live in a world in which silence is broken not only by audible but also by electronic noise. Many of us will have found ourselves anchored to the internet; to social media and to the news over the past few weeks trying to make sense of all that is happening but do we really need to be permanently connected? Psychologists would certainly advise against it. During the Greater Silence in the Friary we try not to use the internet or anything connected to it because we believe that silence may be violated as easily by a smartphone or the internet as it can by a conversation; might this also be something we might think about?

The Daily Office

The last thing I want to offer is a brief thought on the daily Office. In Religious houses the Office is the fundamental basis of both corporate and individual prayer and why? Because the Office helps us to pray. We don't need to feel like praying (I often don't first thing in the morning!); we don't even need to find the 'right' words; all we need to do is to reach out to God in our hearts and minds and let the wonderful ancient texts of the Scriptures – prayed for generations – do the rest. In the Office (and there are many different forms of daily Office) we are given the words we may not be able to summons for ourselves and with them shout, weep, praise, entreat and perhaps even berate God. If you don't use some form of Daily Office (and are, perhaps, struggling to pray during this time of separation from your Church building) who not cultivate the habit; the world stands in desperate need of prayer at all times and that is something which we as the Church can offer.

Brother Joseph Emmanuel SSF is the Novice Guardian of the Society of St Francis, and lives at the Alnmouth Friary. You can find out more about SSF by visiting www.franciscans.org.uk



The Spirituality of Timetables

Fr Nicolas Stebbing CR reflects on how having a timetable can help our prayer life.

When guests arrive at our monastery the first thing they are shown is a timetable. This may seem odd. It may remind them of boarding school, the army, or worse, but in fact it is a key to the monastic life, and any stay within the monastic enclosure will benefit from it.

Timetables bring order to our lives. The monastic timetable tells when the services are, when the meals are and therefore where free time, or time for prayer can be found. Services and meals are of equal importance. Monks and nuns have a long day and work hard but they don't suffer from stress or burn out. That is because their day is well ordered. They don't miss meals. Meals are at the same time every day which means they get properly digested. We know when we will be praying so we can be ready for it, and the spaces between meals and prayer can be allocated to work, reading or recreation as it suits us.

The Coronavirus has brought much evil into our lives and all of us have had to change our life styles. Living under lock down, living in close company with others requires structures. An abbot once told me, "Structures do not give life, but they save life.' Anyone who has lived at close quarters even with beloved children will know the truth of that! Sensible structures do not limit our freedom but create true freedom. It is because of our monastic structures that we remain healthy, live long and find plenty of time to do what we think God wants us to do.

Some Christians are misled by the modern need to be 'spontaneous', to be 'sincere' to think that structured prayer and life are false and lack real meaning. This is not true. We can't always be inventing new prayers, new ways of praying or new insights into the love of God. The old ones are there and they do very well. The Lord's Prayer is simple, structured and very old, yet it never ceases to yield new meaning. We can't only pray when we feel like it. We pray because God wants us to pray. God wants to have a chance, lots of chances, to show his love for us. And we want to show God that we love him. Having set times to pray, to read the Bible, to read a devotional book or even to talk to a friend about Christian life helps us to grow in this Christian life that we so much value.

Covid-19 is a hard thing to live with. Some people have compared it to war. It is a battle, physically to stay alive, mentally not to get frustrated or despairing and spiritually not to give up hope. We need to be tough; we need to grow in self knowledge and in trust of God. We are like soldiers preparing for war, or athletes preparing for a competition. Timetables give God the chance to make us into people who can meet this current crisis and flourish.

Fr Nicolas Stebbing CR is a member of the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield. For more information about the life of the community please visit: www.mirfield.org.uk

Intercessory Prayer

Sr Mary Clare SSM writes about how we can use our prayers as intercessions for other people

Members of a Religious Community come from different walks of life, therefore, on entering the Community, on the whole, the only thing we have in common is our religious vocation. This of course reflects in our prayer. As we are all individuals our personal prayer can take different forms, as is the way for everyone whether or not we live in a convent or a monastery. As a Community, we meet in chapel on a regular basis for the daily celebration of the Mass and for our Daily Office. During the Mass and at some of the Offices, prayers of intercession are offered for those who have requested it and for those for whom we have a mutual concern.

Although being in a Convent allows more opportunities to pray in the silence of a chapel, our prayer is just as important in the context of the busyness of our daily routine.

Belonging to a Community which still wears the traditional habit, invites situations whereby we are asked for our prayers when we are away from the Convent. On a few occasions, I have been asked to pray with someone in the middle of a shopping mall. Once I have assured the person that I will keep them in my prayers I often suggest that they pray themselves as well. Some people feel because they are not a priest or a member of a religious community they are not qualified to pray or that God will not listen to them.

There have been times when people have told me that they find it hard to pray because they do not know the correct words to use. When I pray, I speak with God in the same way as I would speak with a friend. At the beginning of my time of prayer, I always ask God to guide me and to show me who needs my prayers, in this way, I feel that I am putting myself into God's hands. It is a great temptation, particularly in intercessory prayer to tell God what he should do and how he should achieve it. All we need to do is to hold our concerns before God and allow Him to deal with the situation in His own way for He knows better than we do, always remembering that sometimes God will say yes, sometimes no or other times, not yet.

Even when we are confined to the house there are opportunities for prayer. I habitually pray for my Godchildren and remember people on their birthdays and special anniversaries. Being a member of the Guild of All Souls I also pray for the departed on the anniversary of their death, giving thanks for the support I have received from many of them throughout my life. However, each one of us will have our own special prayer intentions. Most of us receive the news on our radio or flashed up on the internet, at such times we can use a brief arrow prayer when we hear of something which we have a particular concern. God will always listen to our prayers even at the times we struggle to pray through tiredness and the busyness of our lives.

Sr Mary Clare SSM is a member of the Society of St Margaret, and is based at St Mary's Convent in Chiswick <https://www.saintmarysconventchiswick.org>

Contemplative prayer

Mother Mary Luke CHC writes on how we might start exploring contemplative prayer

I expect most of us begin our prayer lives with ACTS—Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication, and this way of praying is never superseded. But there can come a time when this type of prayer becomes unsatisfactory and one feels drawn to using fewer words. This may be a call to a more contemplative kind of prayer, one which is, in the words of a Carmelite nun, unoccupied prayer. It is simply giving time to God and not wanting anything out of it for oneself. St Paul says that we are to pray always but if we don't pray somewhere some of the time, we shall never pray everywhere all of the time.

The usual advice is to find a quiet spot and a time when one is unlikely to be disturbed and quietly wait upon God without using any words or thought. The trouble is that when one starts to practise this prayer all kinds of distractions start swirling around in one's mind and there is a strong temptation to leave the seemingly unfruitful emptiness and go off on and do something useful. If you find yourself doing this, don't get annoyed with yourself and, even worse, say that staying in that kind of prayer is useless so give it up, but quietly begin again. Thirty minutes or even an hour spent like this is not wasted. Archbishop Michael Ramsey famously said when asked how long did he spend in prayer each day: "Five minutes, but it takes me an hour to do it."

An aid to staying focussed on God is to use a phrase which anchors one's mind, gives it something to focus on apart from the distractions. The Orthodox use the Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. Others use a short word or phrase such as: Jesus, Love, Maranatha, My Lord and My God. By concentrating on the words of the prayer the mind is occupied and it frees the heart to be with God. During this time God speaks to the heart secretly but the person praying is rarely aware that this is going on. Occasionally one may have an awareness that something has happened though what that something is, is impossible to grasp. I do not know how I know, but I know that I know.

How long should one spend? it all depends on one's circumstances. The ideal is to have two periods of prayer, each for half an hour, in a day but this is a counsel of perfection. But God doesn't ask the impossible and his humility is such that any offering to him will be met with a generous response. What is certain is that if one practises this kind of prayer faithfully, in time there will be a change in oneself. The person praying may not notice it, but those close to such a person will notice it. It is only with hindsight that we can become aware of God's working in our souls. If you feel called to this type of prayer, get on and do it!

Mother Mary Luke CHC is Mother Superior of the Community of the Holy Cross, Costock. You can find more information on their life and work here: www.holycrosschc.org.uk

Anglican Religious Life

“There has never been a renewal of the Church in Western Europe without a renewal of prayer and the life of religious communities.”

—Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, 29/7/13

Religious of Orthodox Tradition (RooT)

RooT (Religious of orthodox Tradition) is a group of Anglican Religious who support the aims of The Society and are committed to the Five Guiding Principles which provide a place for all Religious to flourish in the Church of England.

We are Anglican Monks and Nuns who aspire to live the Monastic way of life developed over the last 2000 years.

We wish to promote the monastic way of living for the 21st century and encourage vocations to the Religious Life.

Early beginnings

The call of the first monks and nuns dates from about the year 250 AD, and their ‘flight’ to the desert where they led a life of unceasing prayer and heroic sanctity. They heard the call of Christ to renounce all, and followed it literally.

This monastic life or religious life began with these solitaries of the desert. They then spread to communities and were further developed in the return to the centres of civilisation, the great cities of the Roman Empire. Here they ministered to the needs of the poor, sick and needy, and contributed to the building up of social and cultural life through the spread of education in schools and other places of learning.

Since that time such witnesses, following in the footsteps of the early Christian martyrs, have fortified the Church. Religious life has been a stronghold for defending the Church’s faith and inspiring mission through prayer and action.

Anglican Revival

In the upheaval of the 16th Century all convents and monasteries in Britain were closed or destroyed. It was not until the early part of the 19th century that religious life was fully revived in the Church of England. Through the Oxford Movement new monastic communities were formed and many Anglo-Catholic devotional and priestly societies were founded.

The women and men at the heart of the monastic revival included many devoted priests including Dr Pusey and John Mason Neale. They were convinced that the Church of England could not seriously claim to be part of the one catholic and apostolic church if it lacked monastic/religious life. Interestingly this revival happened in exactly the reverse order to the original monastic movement. The

first communities to be founded were active Sisterhoods working in the slums, poverty and disease of our cities as later depicted in *'Call the Midwife'*.

This was followed by groups of mission priests and lay brothers such as the *Community of the Resurrection* at Mirfield. With the turn of the nineteenth century enclosed contemplative communities of women emerged such as the *Sisters of the Love of God* at Fairacres, Oxford. Then came the founding of Benedictine Communities and enclosed contemplative orders for men. Also throughout this period a small number of Religious once again began living the solitary life of a hermit.

Vocations to the Religious Life

'Vocation' in this context means that God is somehow calling a person to be a monk or a nun. Despite a likely sense of disbelief and bewilderment to start off with, and persistent attempts on our part to turn a deaf ear, God does not let go, the nagging feeling remains. Something therefore has to be done about it.

Where to turn?

Firstly pray about it. Then ask your parish priest, or someone else who might sympathetically understand. If possible visit a Religious Community - a convent or monastery. Most of them have websites.

RoOT holds annual Monastic Taster Days which allow inquirers to meet members of a variety of Religious Communities, ask questions, hear testimonies and participate in Monastic-style worship.

What is involved?

A radical change of life-style through a response to the call of Jesus to leave everything and follow him — taking up the cross in total trust, day by day.

Living in community with others not of our own choosing but whom God has equally called to this way of life, however different they may be from ourselves.

Expecting to discover God's will for us, individually and corporately, through the guidance and directives of those God has appointed for this purpose. Like Jesus, we come not to do our own will but rather that of the One who invites us, in humble recognition and acceptance of our own fallibility — an obedience even unto death.

A letting go of possessiveness and the accumulation of unnecessary things; living simply and joyfully, in thanksgiving for God's gift of Creation and so cherishing it and sharing its riches with all. Thus, in true poverty of spirit, the religious seeks to put nothing in place of the love of Christ.

A commitment to complete purity of body and spirit, by God's grace. As a temple of the Holy Spirit the monk or nun is wedded to Christ in a unique and permanent relationship and is especially called to love God with the whole heart, soul, mind and strength. Thus freed from self-motivated lesser loves, the monastic person is enabled to love others, and the self, within that LOVE which is God Himself.

A deep attraction is felt to draw close to God in prayer, liturgical and contemplative. A daily Eucharist is the norm, surrounded by the traditional 'Hours of Prayer' the 'Divine Office', spread throughout the day. Time is also set aside for spiritual reading (Lectio Divina) - prayerful meditation of Scripture and the Fathers of the Early Church in particular. Intercession and contemplation have their place too, and study where appropriate — all balanced by simple work with our hands.

A love of the Church, a deep concern for its unity and integrity with a desire to be at its heart despite being paradoxically set apart. Every kind of Religious Community — from the strictly enclosed to the most active — shares in evangelism and service to others, as God appoints.

For more information on Anglican Religious Life and Religious of Orthodox Tradition, please visit <https://www.sswsh.com/Root/> or email us nunsandmonks@gmail.com

A Prayer for Vocations to the Religious Life

Lord Jesus Christ

In your great love you draw all people to yourself;

And in your wisdom you call us to your service.

We pray at this time you will kindle in the hearts of men and women
the desire to follow you in the Religious life.

Give to those whom you call, grace to accept their vocation readily
and thankfully, to make the whole-hearted surrender
which you ask of them, and for love of you, to persevere to the end.

This we ask in your name.

Amen.

