**PRAYER AND ISOLATION**

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After Sunday morning Mass, an inquisitive boy overheard the words “man cave” in a conversation. So, he turned to his dad and asked, “What is a man cave?” His dad was stunned and wasn’t ready to respond. To help the boy, I asked him, “What is a man?” He looked at his dad. “Very good”, I responded. Then I asked him “What is a cave?” Innocently he replies, “It’s where bears live.” Putting two and two together, “A man cave is where men hang out with bears in their caves.” We all had a chuckle. The boy was a bit confused why we reacted that way. One day, he will want a man cave of his own, minus the bears of course!

The reason I share this story is because we all need our own man or woman cave every now and then. I’m not thinking of the luxurious versions with the biggest tv screens, gadgets, pool tables and bar fridges. What I have in mind is a space to retreat. A place where we can go, leaving everything behind, all the hustle and bustle of the world, just to reflect and recharge before returning back into the world. A lot of people can only dream of cancelling all their plans and lock in a few days, or even a few hours of their busy lives. Understandably, not everyone has the same responsibilities in life, and for some people it is extremely difficulty to take some time off for themselves.

This Coronavirus pandemic has basically shaken the world around us, from an international level where we first heard of it earlier this year, nationally when the first case in Australia was detected, locally and even domestically within our own homes and workplaces. All our plans were either cancelled, postponed, or dramatically adjusted. All of us were in lockdowns imposed by the government. The intention was to keep us safe. Yes, it was an inconvenience and has interrupted our lives. At the moment, some are enjoying some form of normality with the added precautions while others are returning back to lockdowns as this unpredictable Coronavirus strikes again.

We have been and are still being affected in one way or another, some more so than others. The following may sound like my complaining, but if you bear with me, you will notice that it is not the case. Personally, these are the ways I was affected by the Coronavirus and its subsequent lockdowns. Some of you may relate.

I celebrated private Masses in an empty church, offering them up for COVID-19 victims and their families, for health workers, and for the safety of those most at risk”; a sober celebration of Holy Week (no washing of feet, Eucharistic Procession or Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament on Holy Thursday, a contactless veneration of the Cross on Good Friday, no Holy Saturday fire); a postponement of the Chrism Mass (I looked forward to renewing my priestly vows with my brother priests); the inability to participate at the Installation of the new Archbishop of Adelaide; the cancellation of the scheduled Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Confessional; the cancellation of all school Masses; minimal contact with others in case they may be contagious; extra precaution when visiting hospitals and nursing homes for Anointing of the Sick; I have turned my car boot into a sacristy with the added alcohol hand sanitiser (cherry flavour), a can of Glen 20, disposable gloves, goggles, tissues, medical face masks (kindly donated), and a long-sleeved gown; burying the dead with minimal loved ones present; There were two close calls of the Coronavirus. The first South Australian to die was one of our Italian parishioners. Another parishioner was one of the QANTAS baggage handlers admitted into ICU. I couldn’t even anoint him in his own home while he and his family were quarantined. That was when it sunk in that this Coronavirus has arrived on our doorsteps from Wuhan. It was depressing to constantly hear negative updates and seeing the number of cases increase significantly throughout the world; I had to postpone face-to-face Marriage Preparations and Weddings; the cancellation of the 6th Asia-Oceania Congress for OFS and YouFra. Firstly, I was honoured to represent Australia and it would have been my first time to Vietnam where my parents come from. Then, the postponement of my three-weeks annual home visitation. I watched my family celebrate my nephew’s second birthday over a videocall. I missed out on the cake! Not that my tummy needs those extra calories! Today, the Capuchin Friars in Australia would have wrapped our annual retreat together. A significant day for me because I would have celebrated my tenth anniversary since my first profession with all my brothers. Fraternity is important in our lives as Franciscans. Lastly, I would have been with you in person in Varroville for this Retreat. But it wasn’t meant to be.

It’s not all bad! On the bright side, during this pandemic period, I started my days earlier at 5.55a.m. with private prayers and some exercise; afternoon walks while meditating on the Rosary; I learnt some Vietnamese to celebrate bi-lingual Masses. I can’t believe that all along I have been pronouncing the Sign of the Cross incorrectly! I have been invited to give online talks to different groups of people seeing that I couldn’t be present physically; I have filled up the petrol tank only twice since March; I got to catch up on my favourite TV series on DVD that was collecting dust over the past two years; in the friary, all four of us friars gather for weekly community Masses (we never got the chance in the last two and half years); each Friday we would play Uno for recreation (that has brought us together. Interesting how a competitive card game brings us together as one!); extraordinarily, I had a lot of time alone! Plenty of time to myself since we all kept our social distancing and isolated ourselves. I can’t complain about that.

We can all approach the compulsory lockdowns as something negative, constantly complain and keep dwelling on the fact that it is not working in our favour, or we can take this once in a hundred years pandemic as an opportunity to finally retreat. We can view this whole period as something positive that God has given us.

When the Coronavirus touched down in Australia and restrictions were being introduced, the Lenten Retreat that I was leading was cancelled on me because the venue was no longer available. Creatively, I argued that just because we can no longer gather on church grounds, we can still pre-record the talks somewhere else and upload them online. That worked out fine! At one of the Q&A, someone asked if this pandemic was God’s way of punishing us. I replied that I don’t see it that way. I see it as an opportunity to love God and to love our neighbour.

People are blaming God for the ever-growing number of Coronavirus related deaths, and for not being able to keep vigil while their loved ones are dying, with the question, “Why are you doing this to us?” I differ.

We have a God who loves us to the point of dying for us. The god depicted by the secular media and those with a twisted understanding of God, is not the same God I believe in. Nor is that god, the One St Francis praised and adored. Our God came into our world to show us how to love. Jesus, God the Son, showed us how to love God and our neighbour.

Some of you or those around you might be wondering, how can we love in the current pandemic? Allow me to share a few examples. Let us begin with loving God.

Each Saturday, when we close with Night Prayer, we will come across the Scripture passage from the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4-7) reminding us each week how to love God. It also appears in the Gospel of Mark (12:30).

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might…”

We have only one God even though there are many voices out there tempting us to go astray. Our God always invites us to an intimate relationship with Him. He loved us with all His Sacred Heart, all His Soul and all His might. We know this because he died on Good Friday and rose on Easter Sunday to save us, to reconcile us with Himself. No other gods have done that. That is how much He loves us!

How do we love Him with our whole heart, soul and all our strength? By keeping His Commandments. The first three specifically refer to God Himself while the remaining seven refer to our neighbour.

Yes, it is difficult to keeps these Ten Commandments. From an ignorant perspective, they seem like an outdated bunch of rules that are a burden. It is a shame that people think this way. It is not the Ten Commandments that need changing, we do! We are all sinners needing God’s love and mercy. Sin keeps us away from God, so it is to no surprise that there are those so deep in sin that they want things to work in their favour. They are the ones who want to get rid of these Commandments in order to love the way they want, to do what pleases them. They want to be gods.

The Commandments are a gift for us from God to free us from sin, not to keep us in sin. God reconciled the world with Himself, not to keep humanity apart. In actual fact, keeping the Commandments works in our favour. We remain united with Him. That is how we love Him.

Each week, we attend Sunday Mass to be with our brothers and sisters to worship Him and to keep holy the Sabbath. That became difficult when the government forced the closure of all places of worship. Understanding that this is the reality and the faithful were not able to fill their obligations, Bishops began giving those within their jurisdiction dispensations.

Massive changes in our lives like this, for example, can be interpreted in a positive or negative way. Positively, we can be creative and find solutions to keep up our prayer life. Some would tune into online Masses and receive Spiritual Communion. While the other types become bitter and voice their frustration that their freedom to practise their religion are ignored. Some consider the church closures as an opportunity to have a holiday away from God and all things godly.

We as Franciscans belong to the positive group. Our prayer life is inseparable from us. As Secular Franciscans, you have professed the following:

I promise to live

all the days of my life

the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ

in the Secular Franciscan Order by observing its rule of life…

…so that I may reach the goal

of perfect Christian love.[[1]](#footnote-1)

“All the days of my life” is self-explanatory. There are no days off from God. We are meant to continue to build an intimate relationship with Him, not to let it slip away.

In our days of isolation, we never cease praying. If anything, we have more reasons to pray. Earlier, I spoke about the pros and cons of the pandemic. Well, having plenty of time to ourselves compared to pre-pandemic allows us to go into our man cave or woman cave. We can accept this as an opportunity to “go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place…you should pray like this: ‘Our Father in heaven…’ (JB; Mt 6:6, 9-15).

It is not uncommon for us Franciscans to retreat. If we are following in the footsteps of St Francis, then praying privately and retreating should be in our blood. One significant Franciscan place is the Carceri, located on one side Mount Subasio. Scattered throughout the dense forest are caves (with no bears). St Francis and his companions would often retreat to these “heavenly mansions” to pray and to find solitude.[[2]](#footnote-2) More importantly, so that he can “focus his heart entirely on God.” [[3]](#footnote-3) The natural surroundings were the perfect location for his initial and ongoing conversion.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Carceri brings us face-to-face with solitude. I should know because I was there nine months ago. There was barely anyone around, maybe because the sun was about to set and it takes a while to make the journey back through the forest, to the Carceri entrance and walk back down to Assisi.

Br Dacian Bluma OFM maintains that St Francis spent about one-half of his converted life in solitude.[[5]](#footnote-5) We may not be able to retreat to the Carceri for half of our lifetime as Franciscans, but we can still attain a sense of solitude during these days of self-isolation. Our homes or our bedrooms can become our caves where we can retreat to seek that necessary solitude – a time with God. So, refreshed inwardly, we may when the time comes be instruments of peace and serve our neighbours with the greatest charity.

Which now brings me to the topic of ‘our love of neighbour.’

It is true that it is difficult to love our neighbour – to lay down one’s life for another or to want the good of the other. I don’t deny it. We live in a world where the lies of the devil are proclaimed and accepted as truths. All his deceptions are in fashion. We need not have to look far. Take for instance the popular movement encouraging protests the world over. How many of us are aware that under the banner of anti-racism are agendas contrary to our faith? How faithful are we as Christians, Catholics, and Franciscans when we align ourselves with a movement that supports abortion, homosexuality, and anti-family agendas? The Black Lives Matter manifesto may appear to be prolife since last month with the absence of the demand for reproductive justice (i.e., abortion) that gives autonomy over our bodies, but in a few clicks and reading their “In Response to the State of the Union”, dated 14 February 2018, the truth comes out.

No way would St Francis encourage his followers, including us, to support abortion, homosexual acts, and anti-family agenda. He commissioned his followers to go out “two by two through various parts of the world, announcing peace to the people, and penance for the remission of sins.”[[6]](#footnote-6) He respected all of God’s creation but most importantly humans. No race was greater than the other. He didn’t discriminate but embraced those on the margins. He physically raised the dignity of outcasts, the injured and those who can’t defend themselves.

If we were to apply that to today’s context, then the life within the womb should be respected and loved. That unborn baby is a precious gift and a child of God. That child is God’s creation. Who are we to destroy life? Regarding those with homosexual tendency, we are called to love them, too. Sexual immorality of any kind is a sin. It breaks the sixth Commandment. If we love those who are struggling to remain chaste, then we would want what is good for them and that is to help them rediscover that God loves them dearly as His children and that He waits for them to be reconciled with Him. Finally, the family is the foundation of a good society. Tearing it apart does a disservice to everyone. We live in a world where the nuclear family is constantly attacked, and children pay the greatest price for the mistakes of those who should know better.

It is a good thing to stand up for what is morally right and to support anti-racism, but seriously not under a banner that flies in my face as a Christian, Catholic and Franciscan.

If I had a choice right now to protest under an authentic Catholic banner to support anti-racism or to isolate, then I would discern between the two according to the way that one of my Spiritual Directors once helped me. Both may be good, but one will be the better because of its fruit.

Right now, when the Coronavirus is spreading like wildfire for a second round, the most charitable thing to do for the common good of all is not to participate in protests. I don’t want to risk getting infected and return home to spread the Coronavirus among my Capuchin brothers, parishioners, the neighbouring school, and everyone else I may encounter. That would be extremely selfish of me! We are called to spread the Gospel, not the Coronavirus! We have made so many sacrifices to stay COVID-19 safe. To undo all that for something that can wait until it is safe to do so, is totally irrational. I would be beside myself if I were the unnecessary direct cause of death of someone I know or turning Newton into a Coronavirus hotspot and shutting down the church again and unable to function as a Capuchin priest. There are other ways of voicing for the voiceless that will not harm or kill my loved ones.

God has willed it for me to be right where I am at the moment. It is good for me to be here, and not anywhere I want to be or am invited to. I know so far, that while isolating myself, I can be more effective by praying for others especially those most in need. Wherever I am alone is my cave. I have my physical “caves” where I can shut the door. Just like St Francis, they are places where I can focus my heart entirely on God as long as I can. That is how I love Him. By praying for others, that is how I love my neighbour. With the protection of divine grace, I can overcome my many fears and anxieties, and be fully recharged to involve myself in the affairs of my neighbours and to attend to their salvation. That is when I venture out to administer the Sacraments especially celebrating the Mass, the greatest prayer of all!

1. Formula of Profession, Secular Franciscan Order: The Rule with Commentary, The General Constitutions, and The Ritual of the Order. pg 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thomas of Celano, First Life 91. ‘Francis’ search for solitary places’, in *Pilgrim’s Companion to Franciscan Places* (Editrice Minerva Assisi, 2013) Page 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas of Celano, First Life 91. ‘Francis’ search for solitary places’, in *Pilgrim’s Companion to Franciscan Places* (Editrice Minerva Assisi, 2013) 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Carceri, in *Pilgrim’s Companion to Franciscan Places* (Editrice Minerva Assisi, 2013) Page 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Carceri, in *Pilgrim’s Companion to Franciscan Places* (Editrice Minerva Assisi, 2013) Page 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thomas of Celano, First Life 29. ‘Francis’ search for solitary places’, in *Pilgrim’s Companion to Franciscan Places* (Editrice Minerva Assisi, 2013) Page 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)