

Coronavirus at Westmalle

It began in March. At first it seemed to be abating, and we didn't want to know more. But sometimes things change very quickly.

As of Sunday, March 15, we could no longer escape the consequences. The places in the refectory had been set apart. Even the stalls in the church were relocated. We continue to be happy that the furniture of our church is modular! The concelebrations were temporarily suspended.

Since the end of March every night at Vespers we have been praying the prayer of Pope Francis for the end of the pandemic.

Since the end of May we have been celebrating Mass every week in Times of Pandemic.

Half measures could not be taken: the guesthouse was closed on March 15, the services in the church were no longer accessible to the public. As a result of the plummeting sales figures, the brewery needed to produce only 60% of the usual production. Cheese sales and production fell by 50%. Everywhere in the abbey, vials of alcoholic gel were installed so that the brothers could disinfect their hands whenever necessary. After Lauds our brother nurse measured our temperatures. We had to learn to cough and sneeze into the elbow. Tons of tissues were purchased by our cellarer (who while shopping learned of the coronavirus measurements out in society).

Thanks to all these efforts, and the brothers who organized these measures, our community has been spared the virus, at least thus far.

But the most significant thing was THE VOID. Celebrating the Sunday Eucharist in the absence of the more or less 85 people from the region really gave us a feeling of being incomplete. We suddenly had more free time, more quiet time. It was a challenge to fill it properly. For some it became a real confrontation with themselves, others became very anxious. (What if it happens to me?)

A special mention of the VONK session: joint training for novices and young professed OSB and OCSO from Flanders and the Netherlands. A session was held by live stream. It was a success for both teachers and younger participants. The young people said that they appreciated the situation of isolation in their monasteries.

Then it was Holy Week. So many people would have liked to celebrate the triduum with us. In communion with all those who were forced to follow the services by computer or on television, we had the privilege of being able to celebrate live. Throughout the containment, we celebrated the Eucharist every day and had the opportunity to commune each day, but only under the species of bread.

We have all followed the news more closely than usual. We wondered if it would be over after Easter? Early May? Could we reopen church and hospitality after Pentecost? None of that! We were only able to reopen in mid-June, and very gradually. Ten people in the guesthouse, twenty in church.

We ask ourselves questions: what will the future be? Will there be a second wave? When? Will there be more new diseases? Should we keep distance from each other all our lives? Will the PAX ever be given at the Eucharist? Will we still hold hands?

If you search for the answers to these questions in five newspapers, you will receive five different answers.

But most importantly, how will the local church evolve? Is coronavirus and the measures to combat it the death blow? Have people completely lost their way to the church after three months of closure? Or, on the contrary, will they attend even more?

Where was the church during this crisis? Why are prayer and faith so undervalued? We could go to the supermarket, to the hairdresser, but we could not come together to pray.

The only thing we can do is follow and enforce the rules. Everything else is in God's hands. There is no shortage of prayer intentions!