

Our community lies some 370 miles (600km) south of São Paulo. As you all know, Brazil is the second country in the world with highest number of Covid cases. Given the continental size of our country, it is quite a complex situation to try to describe. The “epicenter” is certainly in São Paulo City, with more than half a million cases (in a population of 20 million). Rio and some cities in the Northeast area and close to the Amazon also register big numbers. As always, the poor, the elderly, the sick are those who suffer more with it.

Curitiba (the biggest city close to us, with 1.5 million inhabitants) has 23,000 cases. Our small village of Campo do Tenente has “only” 53 cases. So, we are very far from the more dangerous areas and the reality we face here is different, too. Even if some of our relatives have been infected – but so far, all of them have recovered, thanks God.

1) For us, to cope with that situation has been a mystery, something difficult to grasp and put into words. On the one hand, we share in everyone else’s plight. Fifteen days after the first cases in Brazil were reported, we – and most other monasteries, too – closed our guesthouse and our shop. We changed the time of our Sunday Mass – to avoid big crowds in our church – and we stopped hearing confessions and spiritual direction. I think it was the hardest thing to cope with, in the first months. People eagerly desired to come to our Mass, to receive communion, to be heard in confession – but we could not meet their request. We decided not to close our church – even on Sundays – and as a result, there is a certain number of friends and close friends who are always there (the number varies between 10-30 every Sunday; our church can hold 200 visitors; it is still far less than the 30% allowed for churches in our region).

Holy Week was an especially intense experience this year. The whole liturgy made more sense for us and every Office would convey a different grace, a grace that would not have been perceived if this pandemic were not happening. The number of people who attended our celebrations was somewhat greater, but – how to blame them? Our vocation director developed a “Liturgy of the Hours” for our candidates, to be used during the Holy Week, in communion with us. The idea was a success and we distributed it in a Cistercian blog: <https://caminhocisterciense.com/2020/04/08/oficio-monastico-para-o-triduo-pascal/>. By the way, Covid could not stop the arrival of new vocations: three postulants received the habit since the outbreak of the pandemic, and two others have already made simple vows. A third one will profess in December.

We also intensified our contributions to those more in need, offering food, products from our bakery, fruits from our garden and also a financial help for caritative institutions in our diocese.

Our main source of income is our farm and, thanks God, agriculture in Brazil has not experienced such a crisis as other areas. In fact, we expect an increase in relation to last year’s harvest.

2) On the other hand, it has been a very blessed experience. Without the guests/ visitors, we have even more silence and solitude than usual. To avoid the risk of infection, we did away with all dish clothes in our kitchen and began offering only natural (lemon/ orange/ tangerine) juices from our garden. As a result, we had not a single case of flu this year... Excepted these trifle things, our life is the very same. We see it as a big privilege: to be able to attend Mass and the sacraments without any constraints, to have a huge and marvelous place (a 800 acre property, half of it a luxurious virgin forest, with wild animals as deer, monkeys,

herons, etc.) to stroll and pray, without having to use masks and hydroalcoholic gel all the time. In face of all those who painstakingly suffer under the social distancing measures, it is a privilege too big to be “just” thanked for.

The pandemic has also helped us to foster communion and develop our community life. We launched a new website for our products (www.padariatrapista.com.br) and a page on Instagram (@padariadosmonges) who are a success! We sell more through them than in our physical shop... We are developing new products and the whole process involves most members of our community. They are invited to make their comments about the new products, etc. It is very lively and generates a very healthy and charitable ambiance. It is a mystery how such a blessing could come out from this Covid situation!

It is strange to say, but I think there is some secret work of God acting behind all that. Those who come to our Mass are especially hungry for God. People who write us or call us often says they are praying more now than before and profiting more from the sparse and far in-between chances they have of receiving the sacraments than before. Many of them say their house has become a “small monastery” – with enclosure, solitude, silence, manual labor, fraternal life and continual prayer making part of their daily life. Some of them affirm that they are deepening in their Christian faith, reconciling with their past and with other people. How to understand such a thing?

In the Paschal mystery, we see Christ pouring out love, forgiveness and love out of his wounds, suffering and death. And we boldly sing in the Easter Vigil: O happy fault that earned for us so great a Redeemer! Could we not now sing: O blessed illness that earned for us so great an Awakening? It may sound too strong in face of the many thousands of victims, the multitude of those coping with losses, the present economic chaos. But isn't it too strong to sing the Exultet in face of Our Lord hanging dead in the Cross? And isn't it the very heart of our faith? May the Lord open our hearts to understand every single sign he is sending to us in this mysterious time of ours.