

During these past six months of the pandemic, we at Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey in Dubuque IA USA have noticed a much quieter and leisure pace. Through the months we had to cancel outside speakers for classes and our community retreat. In April we closed our guest chapel, guest houses, and little gift shop. For several months we did not leave our property except for groceries (delivered to the car in the parking lot)! Recently we have been able to go out for doctors' appointments.

Due to the generosity of our brothers at New Melleray Monastery and two diocesan priests, we have been very fortunate to continue to celebrate the Eucharist daily (but only for the priest receive from the chalice). Our guest chapel was closed for Holy Week services. The ceremonies were the same but seemed more solemn and unusual without any guests. For social distancing we spread out to every second stall in the chapel.

When the churches in our diocese re-opened (with restrictions) in mid-May, we also opened our chapel to the public, providing masks, hand sanitizers, and removing half of the pews to ensure social distancing. Each night after Compline and on Sunday's after Mass the guest chapel is sanitized.

Our food housekeeper continues to order food over the phone once a week and goes to pick it up, but she cannot be sure in advance of what she will receive. As a result, we decided to enlarge our vegetable garden considerably this year to supplement our food supply with fresh produce.

In the refectory instead of being in a U shape, we spread out one person to a table with all facing the windows overlooking the Mississippi River. For nature lovers it has been a delight to watch the birds, the boats on the river and the change of seasons. We no longer hand-wash any dishes but put them aside for washing in the dishwasher.

Our employees have been able to continue to work in our candy factory, but the employees and the sisters who interact with them wear masks. As for sales, our online sales to individuals have risen and to a small extent have compensated for the loss of sales to stores that are now closed. Our gift shop was our largest part of our sales and its closure also means that our craft-making sisters have no way to sell their creative wares. Most of our annual candy sales occur in the months before Christmas; at this point we can't know how our sales will be affected, so it is also hard to know how much inventory to build up now.

TOWARD THE FUTURE

We had a dialogue to discuss the effects of the pandemic on our community. Some of these effects have been surprisingly positive.

Because of the topography of our land and the fact that we did not build a new monastery but used buildings already on the property, our physical enclosure is poor. Having so few guests, conferences, and exits has given us a new experience of quiet, stability and enclosure. Many sisters have experienced this as a spiritual blessing. We look forward to the restoration of family visits and our service of hospitality, but are also looking for ways to carry our present experience of quiet and enclosure into the future.

Through the encouragement of one of our benefactors we recently started a video series to provide hope and inspiration for the public during this difficult time. In each video one sister speaks for 5-10 minutes on a spiritual topic.

With an increased awareness of so many suffering we pray more fervently for them as we live our life the ordinary, obscure and laborious way.