

## **Some Glimpses of the Confinement at Acey**

### **An Impromptu "Retirement":**

The diffuse threat of this pandemic suddenly became tangible with the forceful entry of the containment measures. Transmitted by the dramatic situation in Italy in particular, the virus made a brutal entry into our lives, our prayer, and reminded us of the fragility of our lives. Certainly, old age is not rare in community. But the end of life's cutting edge, usually experienced as a gradually progressive process which is embraced with serenity by the seniors, was met, this time, with singular anxiety during the first weeks of the virus.

So we closed our doors: reception, guesthouses closed, the door (or portress area) was almost deserted. Also closed for 3 weeks was our electrolysis industry with its 15 employees. And then we had to assume the services where previously 3 employees had been helping us: (cooking, laundry, cleaning). Thus far we have not adopted social distancing within the community, neither in choir nor in the refectory, both out of realism and to avoid an undesirable psychosis.

We were acutely aware of being privileged, with an ideal setting for containment, and our usual liturgy. It is undoubtedly the closed-door celebration of the Eucharist that has been a trial, not to mention the lonely Pascal Triduum: an invitation to live more consciously our role of supplication and intercession for the multitude, invited to the Eucharistic table, and yet, not concretely able to participate on account of the virus and containment. Our church remained open outside the Mass and the other services, and received visitors praying sometimes in moving ways.

The increased loneliness had an effect of refocusing us on the heart of our vocation as a community in the desert, of silence, of seeking the one thing necessary. It was appreciated in varying degrees (according to peoples' «apostolic» sensibilities), but overall, it was lived out quite well. The deadly threat, the importance of being one of the few signs of ecclesia, was reminiscent of the experience of Tibhirine, whose memory we, of course, celebrated. Many were pleased to point out the providential aspect of a on an imposed time of retreat, together with a good part of humanity. This period also coincided with our superior ad nutum's first months of service, and allowed a reciprocal time of coming to know one another, without possibility of escape!

### **A more urgent call to solidarity in prayer:**

On the bulletin board in the cloister a poster soon appeared, with a picture of a nurse in prayer and the text: "May God heal all those who suffer from coronavirus in all the countries of the world", and it still reminds us today of our role of intercession. This attention to "all the countries of the world" also evokes us to prayer for societies where the epidemic only competes with other dramatic scourges: war, misery, hunger, and their corollaries of those situations of disastrous health sanitation.

We did not wish to fuel the excess of "virtual masses" (many families, or groups, were able to invent forms of substitute liturgies, which honored the baptismal priesthood of the faithful). We have simply intensified our prayer, with intentions related to the emergency at the various Hours of the Office, the regular celebration of the Mass "in times of epidemic", or other times of community prayer, with various devotions such as the rosary, sometimes accompanied by fasts (communally or individually). On Palm Sunday, a traditionally popular celebration, we have blessed baskets of twigs, left for visitors at the entrance of the

church, or distributed them to the nearest villages: a small initiative which seemed to be very much appreciated.

A newsletter initiated by the CMF allowed us in the early days of the epidemic to discuss the arrangements made by one or the other community, and above all, to join in the fight of certain communities struggling with the virus (notably, Fleury, Oelenberg.).

### **... and in listening:**

We have been very touched and challenged, especially through our families, by the abandonment of hospitalized persons, the loneliness of the elderly in EPHAD, and by the inability to honor the deceased with dignity. Two of our brothers lost a relative (a brother and a sister) from the Coronavirus, without being able to attend the funeral. They participated in a delayed celebration this summer.

By means of communication (phone, e-mail) we tried to remain close, listening to the sufferings, and the concerns, of our loved ones. We have also integrated a telephone listening network (green number) set up by the episcopate at the request of the French government.

But we were able to experience how much solidarity works in both directions: many people have asked news of us, worried about us, the older ones in particular. And the lack of external relations may have weighed on the morale of one or the other.

Our hospitality was so mismanaged and yet, it was symbolically honored, in the person of a "backpacker" (a homeless person) who came just at the beginning of the confinement and remained our host during these weeks of isolation!

At the end of the confinement, there was an opportunity for community sharing, where everyone was able to tell how they experienced this particular time – expressed in the above remarks.

### **What's next?**

The consequences of this crisis are still only partially known. It seems that some of our regulars of the Sunday assemblies have not yet returned, despite a good summer attendance. In terms of hospitality, we have halved the capacity of the guesthouse to meet sanitary standards, and group accommodation is still extremely limited.

Economically, our electrolysis business is struggling to fill its order book. The more favourable economic situation of the past year still allows us to help the people who are asking us, and whose number is growing. More generally, it is the societal face of the "Afterwards" that does not seem in a hurry to keep its promises (or those whose awareness was sharpened by the containment and which prompted a plethora of articles.) More than ever, it calls for our vigilance and our prayer of hope.

Your Brothers of Acey