

Tarrawarra Abbey COVID-19 – Sharing of our Experience

In one sense, we could say that it hasn't affected us greatly, for our life goes on with its usual routine. However, it is in our Guesthouse that the effects of the pandemic have been most keenly felt. Since this all began in March last year, Our State of Victoria has been in lockdown for over 200 days. This means that our Church and Guest House has been closed to the public during these times. In between lockdowns we have been able only to partially open our Guest House to a limited number of guests, and to only open our Church to the public for Sunday mass. This has meant a loss of contact, a disconnect, with broader community; we have not been able 'to welcome/receive Christ' as we would desire (our hospitality is limping along on only one leg), and we now realise how much we treasure this contact — in a way, with no one joining us in prayer, there is a sense of our being left on our own, and the witness of our lives is now largely unseen. That said, we are aware of the hardships many in the wider community are experiencing due to COVID-19: physical and mental health issues, loss of income with ensuing financial worries, and so on, which we ourselves have largely been sheltered from — we are blessed to be living in the monastery. Those of our members, who come from overseas, experience a rise in anxiety over fears for the safety of their families back home. With the rise of new variants of COVID, the prospect of a prolonged pandemic is now very real, bringing with it a sense of life very much on hold. An upside to this very real, if enforced, separation from the world is that we have not experienced the usual bouts of colds and flu.

The sense of isolation is felt also at a wider level. Our international borders have been closed; international travel is not possible. One of our novices was unable to return home for his mother's funeral; a great hardship for him. With no international visitors arriving, the government has put on hold all its visa work, leaving all visa holders in limbo on bridging visas, including some of our members who come from overseas, with a corresponding rise in anxiety levels due to insecurity. This has also meant that those from overseas interested in pursuing a vocation with us, are unable to do so. We have little contact with the wider Order due to the cancellation of the General Chapter and no Visitations (either from our Motherhouse, or to our daughter houses), and our Region (being spread across many nations, cultures, and language groups) has not found a way to operate effectively — Regional Meeting and Regional Formators' Meeting have had to be abandoned (this will impact on our Region's ability to contribute to the next General Chapter's agenda). With lockdowns occurring at different times and in various places within our country, State borders open and close, restricting internal travel — our Br Peter went up to Sydney for his brother's funeral in June, and he has been unable to return to the monastery since then. Contact with other local religious has largely been confined to zoom meeting, which is not such a great experience. Some are now more appreciative of the contact with family and others in the wider community afforded them by the internet and social media, and also for study purposes.

In the community, with everyone home for an extended period (a new experience), we have experienced an amazing lack of tension in our midst, and pleasingly we have remained united; we are rather blessed! During these worrying times we are also mindful of the need for self-care, including especially the need for physical exercise and personal prayer. Some have found this slower, more isolated way of living gives more time for quiet reflection and prayer.

Liturgically, we often have to wear mask when the public is present at Sunday Eucharist, and we have to observe social distancing. Our fourteen members are now spread out in the Church, which means that we don't always hear one another so well due to people's varying ability to project their voices; the quality of our liturgy is deteriorating. With fewer distractions, our attendance at liturgy has improved somewhat. With the absence of the public at liturgy, newcomers to the community have experienced a lessening of performance-anxiety in their various liturgical rolls.

Economically, with the initial closure of places of worship in the wider community last year (it remains to be seen what the long-term impact of the closure of Churches will have on the practice of the faith), our Eucharistic Breads business collapsed. We were spared economic hardship through generous government support. With COVID infection coming under control, many of the restrictions were lifted and economy began to recover; we are now back at 60%. But now with the re-emergence of COVID in its delta variant, many of the restrictions have returned. This time, however, we have not received any government assistance — one can only hope that this situation will not continue for any great length of time. Most of the community have now been fully vaccinated, with the four younger men to get theirs this coming week. Hopefully, as more of the wider community become more fully vaccinated, we will reach a time when we no longer will have to resort to lockdowns and so permitting life to return to something more normal.