

THE GENERALATE AND CORONAVIRUS

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Some of you have kindly expressed your interest and concern for us here at the Casa and how we are faring, living as we do in Italy, the present epicentre of the Coronavirus outbreak and its deadly consequences. I am glad to be able to say that all twelve of us in residence are well, as far as we know, though some are perhaps more anxious than others.

Life goes on here as normal in terms of the monastic day and timetable, but the big difference is that we are all present in the house at the same time due to the restrictions introduced two weeks ago by the government in a decree aptly entitled “I stay at home!” And so we do! We don’t have a choice: exits are allowed for real necessities (food and medicine), for essential work, and for particular personal reasons. Checks are made by the police and one needs to carry an official document justifying one’s reason for one’s journey.

Our cellarer, Brother Javier, who gets our provisions once a week, was stopped at police check points both going and returning from a recent shopping trip. So enforcement of the restrictions is being taken more and more seriously. I can see this just from looking out my window and seeing that the car park in the square is completely empty. Normally, on working days, it is packed tight with about 150-200 cars. Now there is not a car to be seen. Every day is like a Sunday! The goal is, of course, to reduce human contact and the risk of passing on the virus. The universities are closed, and so our two students (Fathers Maxi and Antonio from Rawaseneng) are working from home while the Abbot General and his Councillors are grounded! But we have plenty with which to usefully occupy ourselves.

In this country the epicentre of the Coronavirus is Northern Italy and, in particular, the region of Lombardy, which is about a 5-6 hours’ drive from us here in Rome. Living for the past few weeks with blue skies and sunshine beaming in the window, it seems strange to hear of the havoc that Coronavirus is wreaking just a few hours up the road. The number of deaths per day in Italy is around 600-700, and most of these are in the North. We hear of the heroic, round-the-clock work of doctors, nurses, hospital workers, clergy, religious, the civil authorities, and even the Army as they give themselves (and, in a number of cases, *their*

lives—33 doctors have died) in the service of the afflicted. One feels small in the face of such self-sacrifice, compassion and solidarity. Three cheers for humanity!

Some days ago a few of us saw a brief video clip that had to do with the city of Bergamo (birthplace of Pope Saint John XXIII). In it we saw 15 large Army trucks full of coffins taking away the dead after nightfall to other towns and provinces, because neither the cemeteries nor crematoria of Bergamo could cope with the numbers of the deceased! It was a macabre reminder of the extent of the loss of life as well as of the struggle of those fighting the virus and the suffering of the bereaved, separated from their loved ones in their suffering and in their death.

Coronavirus has broken in on our world and disturbed the plans of rulers and of nations, and also of our own small monastic world, in a way which no one was prepared for. Our agendas for meetings, visitations, travel plans, even hospital visits, community projects or just daily community life have all been derailed. Many of us are perhaps experiencing enclosure in a way that was known only to those who lived in the monastery thirty or forty years ago! We have been pushed out of our comfort zone and called to realise in another way the fragility of our lives and how little control we have over them.

We have a new terminology now: we speak of “social distancing” to refer to keeping a safe distance from each other to avoid passing on or contracting Coronavirus! We can see the struggle among the nations of the world, the struggle to protect our own land and at the same time the desire to collaborate with others. We close our borders and at the same time we need each other. We want to find a cure and we work with others, and yet we want it for ourselves first—if we can get away with it. We live in a situation of crisis and a defining moment for humanity. We need God’s help. And we also need to encourage one another, as St. Paul says. The Italians, at least in some popular quarters, do some of that by singing and making music from their balconies and so lifting their spirits. A little bit of that has happened at the Casa too.

We noted here that on Sunday afternoon, March 15, Pope Francis made a short “pilgrimage” to the Icon of Our Lady Salvation of the Roman People at the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, and he then went on to visit the miraculous cross in the Church of St. Marcellus, also in Rome. This cross was carried through the City in 1522 to end the great plague. Pope Francis went there to pray for an end to this pandemic, for healing for the sick, for lasting peace for the dead and the comforting of the bereaved. He encouraged the use of the prayer he recited on this occasion for our present circumstances. Living in Rome as we are, we here at the Casa have taken to saying the attached prayer together after Vespers and then spending some moments in silence. We find it good to do this and we trust that it does good.

So now you have a little window into our present life at the Casa. Thank you for your concern. Let us entrust ourselves with confidence into God’s hands and pray together for the wellbeing of all, and especially for an end to the Coronavirus pandemic and for the healing of the ills it has brought to the lives of so many.

With our fraternal prayers and good wishes,

On the solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord,
March 25, 2020.

Eamon Fitzgerald
Abbot General

POPE FRANCIS’ PRAYER FOR AN END OF THE PANDEMIC

O Mary, you ever enlighten our way as a sign of salvation and hope. We entrust ourselves to you, Health of the Sick. At the foot of the Cross you shared in Jesus’ pain with steadfast faith. You, Salvation of the Roman People, know what we need. We are certain that you will provide for us. As at Cana in Galilee, you will see to it that joy and feasting return after this moment of trial. Help us, Mother of Divine Love, to cling to the Father’s will and to do what Jesus tells us, for He took our sufferings upon Himself and bore our sorrows so as to bring us, through the Cross, to the joy of the Resurrection. Amen.