

COVID 19 at Valsereana

The coronavirus arrived quietly at first, then began to impose itself more and more obviously, starting from Lent of 2020. Two events marked the separation between the pre-Covid and the post-Covid period: the blessing of Father Loris of Frattocchie — the last occasion to go out before the confinement — as well as a conference which I had been asked to give to the clergy of Volterra on the occasion of the ninth centenary of the Dedication of their Cathedral. Then Lent began with a week of retreat on the prayer of the psalms, preached by Father Marco Pavan who introduced us into this special Lent of Covid 19.

The impact of the emergency put a stop to many activities and projects: stopping the great work of preparation of the new construction for the community in Syria; stopping the transition to the operational phase for the participation (by enthusiastic and community vote) in the history of the Annexed House at Tre Fontane. Halting projects for a visit in Angola and Syria; a halt to works of restructuring the “Casetta”.

This has brought up some possible responses:

Personal and Public prayer: participation on the internet in the Pope’s day of prayer with a plenary indulgence; adopting a special Marian prayer (Stella Maris) at each office; adoration every Sunday afternoon with prayers appropriate to the circumstance (from war, plague and famine deliver us, Lord); the daily Rosary on the part of a group of volunteers.

Ora et Labora: the creativity of the sisters of the Cosmetics Laboratory who immediately produced a hydro-alcoholic gel — a happy formula which is fragrant, does not stick, does not dry the skin, etc... This raised the morale of the community again and made us happy at the outset to be able to make a gift of it to our city hall, the hospital, and the Red Cross. The sale of this product has also allowed us partly to cope with the lack of revenue from our hotel industry and our retail outlet... The sisters of the Novitiate were inspired by this to draw up a five-act theatrical work for the feast of their Mistress of Novices. Here is the plot:

(external voice): We are in the Wuhan lab where the most avant-garde scientists of the nation are at a very secret meeting to make decisions that could change the fate of the whole Chinese and world population. A young Chinese woman, secret agent k. 112, is present at this meeting...

And we send her as a well-trained spy to steal from a convent in Tuscany a gel formula which could stop the contagion of the Coronavirus... The spy presents herself as a postulant at Valsereana, makes the required conferences, an internship, and at the end converts and enters the monastery... The plot ends with a victory song and the text that recalls Blessed Gabriella’s vision of the mission in China...

[There is] the awareness of our fragility and vulnerability: a fear, sometimes unreasonable, at the possibility of contagion: no one in the community has been affected by the Covid virus, except someone in our families and among our friends. With sorrow we have shared in the death of Fr. Vincenzo, abbot of Casamari Abbey, and in the situation of Vibodone and of Ghiffa... The plight of our elder sisters remains fragile, but for the moment we have had no deaths and our chaplain emeritus has happily celebrated his 96 years.

The trouble before the closing of our Masses, brought awareness of the value of the Sacrament: during the Sunday chapters, I wanted to resume the theme of the liturgy, of the Eucharist in the texts of our Fathers... We are grateful for having always been able to maintain the Office and the eucharistic Liturgy as usual, including Holy Week, thus in Spiritual Union with the world which did not have this grace, with our local Church which celebrated the ninth centenary of the dedication of its Cathedral, by cancelling all planned cultural and religious manifestations (an event prepared for many years!!!!) and in union with the civil and religious authorities of our land. Another reason for our trouble has been the interference of the civil authorities in strictly religious questions.

The confinement caused by the Covid [virus] however has allowed Lent to be truly Lent. It is not nice to say it, but the advantage of the Covid [virus] has been that of recovering certain essential values of our life; among others, an effective separation from the world... Even prayer has gained from it: prayer that has at heart the whole Church and the world. Our dialogs on this subject have highlighted above all the word “responsibility”, as also a greater care in our interpersonal relationships, and also understanding to what extent it is only from faith that hope for all of society is reborn, as in the time of St. Benedict.

In addition, we have taken care to treat the **information** carefully with lectures and short videos as well as the **community’s formation** with some conferences and also Sunday chapters and retreat-Sunday conferences by Dom Guglielmo: Christian synthesis in the frescoes of Raphael (M. Franc). A little course of formation in liturgical reading (Sr. Patricia) “The Betrothed of Manzoni (Sr. Patricia); an in-depth study of the rogations (Sr. Maria Benedicta); the iconography of the Ascension (Sr. Maria Chiara); a beautiful conference of Md Monica on the most significant Marian apparitions in this anniversary year of Jacinta; and now a resumption of teaching for the centenary of St. John-Paul II.

We have taken great care of the **liturgy**, of consecration to Mary in union both with the local church, which celebrates the Jubilee of the Cathedral and which had to celebrate it in quarantine, as well as with the universal Church, participating with it at the moment of prayer proposed by the Pope, March 27th, and with our Order and our filiation with the consecration to Mary, May 13th and 31st.

A volunteer group says the rosary every day for vocations, just as we participated in the novena of Blessed Gabriella.

The end of the Easter season, the coming out of confinement, the formation conferences, as well as the changes that have taken place, have been like an awakening of the faith and the passing of a generation: at Pentecost. The new monasticate began with a new formator, Sr. Valeria, and a young professed, Sr. Giulia Maria. The following day the new formation of the Schola was set up, for us a rather historic change. It will be followed by the reorganization of the commission (on liturgy), some small and large meetings on the economy, on formation, etc. There are three people in probation, to which will soon be added a fourth: two over sixty years of age and two young people, signs which require a response of choral faith.

Problems and questions that emerged during this time: after the experience of totalitarianism, what is the new power that is not being recognized in the global management of the pandemic? What is the testimony we are asked to give today? We are impressed by what seems to be an excess of protocol for hygiene around sacred objects as for the distribution of Communion..., and for the Mass in general. The experience of the fear it induced has made us ask ourselves if our faith truly passes through death and life. Those newly in formation raise a question about the configuration of the times of formation, and we hope that General Chapter, even if delayed by it, could work for this. The protocol for sexual abuse has become, in an unforeseen way, much less important than that of hygiene, but questions on certain substantial issues such as evil, conscience, faith..., our pain before so many deaths, the difficulties of numerous friends in direct contact with the sick, unaccompanied death— these remain...

Sr. Maria Francesca