

## **Sharing our experience of Covid-19**

Like many, we were surprised by the pandemic which exploded like a thunderclap. The planet suddenly saw itself confined without being prepared for it. At the human level, it appeared that such moments of crisis reveal the movements or reflexes that inhabit us: fear or recklessness for some, withdrawal into oneself for others, but also generosity, responsibility, dedication, sharing ... It is an opportunity for spiritual discernment.

Very concretely, the "national confinement" phenomenon put in place on March 15, 2020, has strengthened the spirit of brotherhood between us to seek together how to apply the health measures requested by the government. Since the Father Abbot (already gone to Africa, at the beginning of March) was also 14 days in quarantine, on his return, this time was for us an unprecedented experience which will remain forever engraved in our hearts, and the awakenings which it aroused will have contributed to a very personal deepening of our monastic vocation which is difficult to express in words. We also measure how much we have benefited from the privileged setting of the monastery, the environment, and the grace of our vocation to live this experience in peace and trust in God.

No brother was infected with the virus, so we were able to maintain a balance in our life and various activities as usual. Of course, we adopted the recommended barrier gestures, but without wearing the mask in church or in regular places. People from the outside are required to do this and we also stick to it when meeting with people from outside and for outings outside the monastery. The Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist have always been celebrated according to the usual schedule. Perhaps the most prominent feature of the period of confinement was the absence of guests and the absence of worshipers at services and at the Eucharist, as the church was not accessible to outsiders.

Work and economic activities were maintained, but two sectors were more directly affected: on the one hand, the guesthouse, closed during the confinement, and which could not be reopened until mid-June; on the other hand the store, the first source of income, which was not closed (at the request of the mayor of the municipality) but whose opening was limited to a few hours in the afternoon considerably reduced the activity and turnover.

During the confinement, with the exception of the orchard workers, the other employees (store, guesthouse, general maintenance) had to be partially laid off, with varying conditions depending on their work sector. They returned to work in June for some, July for others. The cooks, employees of a catering company providing meals since March 1, have never left their stoves!

Since the deconfinement (May 22) and the opening of the guesthouse (around mid-June), hospitality and the economy have fortunately recovered. A limited number of guests can take part in the liturgy, respecting the security measures and distancing gestures. Mass on Saturday and Sunday was open to outsiders from July 25. Currently, due to the physical distancing to be observed which limits the number of places in the church, 80/90 people participate in the Sunday Eucharist, or about 1/3 of the usual Sunday assembly. In general, parishes and abbeys are now noticing a drop in the number of people at Mass. The main cause does not seem to be only the limited number of places in the buildings.

This simple description shows that to date the consequences have not produced serious effects, neither on the brothers from the point of view of health, nor on the economy which has not been totally paralyzed, but this situation could not have dragged on too much longer. Even if the future may hold some surprises, in reality we do not know anything, we are continuing the necessary work projects on the side of the gatehouse where a new wing must be built to restructure the reception area, and to be able to accommodate a few people upstairs, also set up a room in accordance with the labor regulations, and create a memorial to the martyrs of Algeria with particular attention paid to our brothers of Tibhirine.

It would be inappropriate to praise confinement for its virtues, but it must be recognized that this pandemic has made it possible to slow down our pace of life, to enjoy a climate of deeper silence, to privilege, at the spiritual level, what the usual pace has not allowed in the same way, both for prayer (more marked intercession) and for involvement in the common life. If we have not set up a system for broadcasting the liturgy or if we have not installed anything visual in the church to draw our attention to faces, we have strongly felt the communion with the faithful and friends who take part regularly in liturgical celebrations and, more broadly, with people who are unable to travel to celebrate their faith in places of worship. The empty places were like an eye opener.

The French Monastic Conference (CMF) facilitated and encouraged an exchange of news by e-mail between monasteries of monks. This has strengthened the fraternal bonds between our communities and stimulated prayer, especially for communities affected by the virus. We realize even more that we are all in the hand of God and that our life is totally ordered to the praise of his glory.