

Sharing our Lockdown Experience - Esmeraldas, Ecuador 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the OCSO. We reach you all at this very special time with our love, our prayers, and our deepest wish for you to be in good health and filled with peace. We first thank our Abbot General and his Council for this "space" that lets us share our experience.

Someone once asked a poor girl, "What was the happiest day of your life?" Without hesitation she said, "the day my father died." The bewildered person asks her, "How come? ..." The girl replies, "Because for those few days we had food, everybody paid attention to us, kept hugging us, and praying for us..."

Perhaps at this time we find ourselves with just such a faith—"like that of a child"—greatly enjoying God's goodness at a time that is, paradoxically, also a time of pain and death. At present, as MONASTICS we have many privileges. And we ask ourselves, Is this normal? ... Should it be like this? ... Is this how the promised "hundredfold" works out? ... Among us there are many questions, sufferings, fears, a plurality of opinions, and a number of "readings" of the current situation. Could we be learning to personally receive Saint Benedict's advice to "daily keep death in mind"? Could it be a time when Micah's prophecy touches my life—"You shall not walk haughtily, for it will be an evil time" (Mic 2:3)?

But we all agree that it is a time of GRACE and a time to live with gratitude. In Community, we celebrate the Eucharist every day; we have Fr. Stan as Chaplain for these celebrations and for the sacrament of Reconciliation. In addition, our Holy Week and Easter celebrations without guests had a more intimate character than ever. We celebrated a special Blessing for the universe and processed with the Blessed Sacrament throughout the Monastery and our surroundings. At Vespers, we embrace Pope Francis' intention including special prayers for pandemic victims and health personnel and all those it affects in any way, especially the poorest and most vulnerable.

Another privilege for which we are grateful, simple as it is, is our daily food. Thanks to Mepkin, the Brothers at Paraíso, friends and family, and other benefactors who have always been there for us, all thirty of us and Father Chaplain lack are provided daily. We marvel at the great ongoing generosity.

Our monastic life's journey as such has not changed, except for the programming of our annual Spiritual Exercises and the Regular Visitation. At this time we in fact live the separation from the world and austerity of life with more intensity—and that also goes for fervor in prayer that may be prompted by fear of illness and death. We also experience a deeper faith that our "secret apostolic fruitfulness" can "serve the whole human race," compared to times when we may have centered on ourselves and undervalued what we are and what we do. We want to overcome an immature faith puzzled by this time's "plandemic" dimension.

Our Community, which is practically at a standstill, as if on strike, paradoxically has lots of work, even though it's not income producing. We are using what is in fact a "work stoppage" to make face masks out of recycled fabric from the production of liturgical ornaments; we have been donating them to our neediest brothers, especially those in an unprotected indigenous ethnic group in our province's north, the "Chachis."

In the present situation, we have found time and new ways to continue with formation courses; at the moment, at the invitation of our brothers at Paraíso, all the sisters are participating in Dom Bernardo Olivera's Conferences. This is a great gift.

We have also found "space" for various projects; we chose to start a beekeeping industry, in view of the current demand for bee honey. We have launched the project, financed for us by Mother María Jesús' family. Next year, God willing and thanks to Trappist Aid, we will repair sidewalks, columns, and walls damaged by the 2016 earthquake. We have "updated" the Guesthouse with in-depth maintenance and sprucing. The field surrounding the building was extended, thanks to the whole Community's work—something that is not feasible when there are guests. This whole welcoming area is back in operation at half capacity, following current norms. Last but not least, we are making Eucharistic bread in small quantities.

The city of Esmeraldas is known as among the poorest in the country. We do not know the number of infections in town because there is insufficient data: positives do not show up, in the absence of tests. Most people self-medicate and opt for staying home because, in case of death, at least they know where the body is. In our country, the chaos at hospitals and morgues with regard to identifying the dead is alarming. Along with this negligence, there is corruption; a very sad reality. We admire some bishops' courage to denounce corruption and sanitary negligence, speaking up loud and clear and helping families in their dioceses with medicines.

Humboldt once described Ecuadorians as "strange and unique beings: they sleep peacefully in the midst of crunching volcanoes; they live poor lives amid incomparable wealth; and they rejoice to the tune of sad music." Linking this idea with our life these days, accompanied as it is with the sad music the world is playing, this is how we find ourselves: strange, quiet and poor, full of riches in the midst of the "crunching" virus that—for now—we can neither see nor feel.

May the Lord fill us with his strength to continue day by day in this "school of divine service." And may we experience all the tenderness of his Love in the rest of 2020, this year of special Mercy. In Blessed Mary, Mother of Hope, we send you a big hug from your sisters at Esmeraldas, who also trust deeply in all of your prayers, dear brothers and sisters of the OCSO.

Esmeraldas, August 15, 2020

Solemnity of Our Lady's Assumption into Heaven,
Patroness of the Citeaux.