

REPORT ON THE COVID-19 EXPERIENCE: GENERALATE AT ROME

In Italy the first case of Coronavirus was confirmed at the end of January. In early March it impacted the entire country, especially the North, and in a few days Italy became the epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe. On March 11th, when the worst period began, Italian civil authorities imposed a nationwide lockdown that lasted until June 3rd. During this period people were not allowed to leave their homes except for essential needs.

The world came to a halt, and we too stayed home. Some say that it should not be too difficult for us monks to stay at home, since we are accustomed to living within an enclosure. However, to live the charism of a monastic vocation is not the same thing as hiding in a shelter. What the present crisis calls for, rather, is a spirit of collaboration for the good of all, something that mainly translates into following the guidelines of civil and church authorities. What is expected of us is a concrete obedience, an embodied charity.

In general we lived peacefully through the period of confinement. We performed our daily tasks, and daily life continued at an even flow. As a community we took some preventive measures: more distance between us in choir; division into small groups to wash the dishes; rules for the reception of visitors. Also, at the end of Vespers, we began to recite together Pope Francis' prayer to "Our Lady Salvation of the Roman People", to implore the end of the pandemic and as a gesture of communion with those suffering.

On the one hand, we felt privileged to be able to celebrate daily Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours in common, and to have a spacious house with a garden in which to stroll. This fostered self-knowledge and a discovery of God's bounty in small, everyday things. At the same time, however, we are conscious of sharing in the suffering of the world, the loss of loved ones and the anguish of the unemployed. It was sad to hear news every day regarding the mounting rate of infections and deaths, and to see the fear, loneliness and anguish of so many people. Thus, our monasteries too have been affected by the pandemic in one way or another. We are in communion with all the brothers and sisters of the Order in their distress and concern.

Some communities have said, "Now we are living true monastic life (solitude, recollection...) and focusing on the essential". But this observation has made us here at the Casa ask: "So what, then, were we living before the pandemic?" Perhaps just asking such a question is for us a fruit of this grave world emergency. The pandemic has given us the possibility of becoming more aware of our perennial fragility and need for the Creator.

Despite all the incredible technological advances we have made, despite the legitimate pride we can take in having achieved so much, the overall impact of this crisis has nonetheless been a sense of helplessness and humiliation. We have perhaps been at times tempted to think we had achieved control over our world, but now we can see clearly that this is not true. The pandemic has flattened human pride. All our travels and projects, even the General Chapter, have been cancelled, and with that all our plans for the future have changed. For example, the Abbot General must continue in his function here at Rome until the next Chapter can finally convene, and the same applies to some Councilors who were looking forward to ending their service this fall.

We are clearly living through a crucial moment in the history of humanity and the Father is calling us to conversion of heart and to a renewal of the quality of our life. The crisis is challenging us to give new impetus to our vocation to prayer. An opportunity is being offered us to rediscover basic human values, to enter into tighter solidarity with our brothers and sisters, and to live what is truly essential, fully trusting in God. In other words, we must become true witnesses of Christ in the world.