



Missionary Oblates
– Always Close to the People

Oblate Connections

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Between September 2019 and January 2020 we welcomed three Oblates from different parts of the Oblate world to share in the Mission in our islands. These men were appointed to Kilburn, Edinburgh and Colwyn Bay. The aim was to initially be inserted in the local Mission and then to explore new possibilities for Oblate Mission. Little did we know that the Coronavirus would strike and deeply affect all our plans. In this issue of Connections we would like you to meet these men and hear something of their experience of 2020.

We have all been affected by the Coronavirus and the response that has been necessary to control the situation. Many of us expected that the problem would be gone by now but sadly that is not the case. We are going to live with the reality of the Virus for some time to come. This fact presents us with new challenges as a faith community. We have seen many positive responses to the situation. In parishes new ways have been found to reach out to those most vulnerable. How we celebrate the mass and celebrate the sacraments have called for creativity and fresh thinking. The online faith community has grown with the sharing by so many people of their faith and life. The annual Oblate Lourdes Pilgrimage took place online. Yet more is needed. As a Missionary Congregation in a Missionary

Church we need to bring Good News into the New Reality.

Jesus said “I came that they may have life and have it to the full”. John 10:10. How do we hear these words today? The present situation stops us in our tracks. Life is not about consumerism, activism or any other “ism”. We are discovering again the importance of the simple things. We are been called to a new appreciation of time , space, relationships and all that is important in daily life. As Christians we are also reminded of what’s important in terms of our faith. Our relationship is not with an institution but with the person of Jesus Christ. This relationship reminds us that we are sisters and brothers of one another and are been called to care for and love one another in new ways. Jesus again said: Heaven and Earth will pass away but my words will not pass away” Lk21: 33. These days are a time to focus on his words. They provide what we need for the time ahead.

As we welcome new Oblates, as we sustain the Mission as we move into the future we can do so in partnership with one another nourished by the word of God that promises “life to the Full”.

– Fr. Oliver Barry, OMI, Provincial

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Moving Beyond Mistakes and Weaknesses	2
Lourdes Virtual Pilgrimage	4
Being Close to the People When it is Most Needed – Belarus	7
Starting a New Mission in a Time of Covid-19	8
Challenging Times at Wistaston Hall	11
Some Secrets Worth Knowing	12
The Story of Fr Noble	14
A Poet’s Insight	16



Moving Beyond Mistakes & Weaknesses

– Fr Ron Rolheiser, OMI

“The excusable doesn’t need to be excused and the inexcusable cannot be excused.”

Michael Buckley wrote those words and they contain an important challenge. We’re forever trying to make excuses for things we need not make excuses for and are forever trying to excuse the inexcusable. Neither is necessary. Or helpful.

We can learn a lesson from how Jesus dealt with those who betrayed him. A prime example is the apostle Peter, specially chosen and named the very rock of the apostolic community. Peter was an honest man with a childlike sincerity, a deep faith, and he, more than most others, grasped the deeper meaning of who Jesus was and what his teaching meant. Indeed, it was he who in response to Jesus’ question (Who do you say I am?) replied, “You are the Christ, the son of the Living God.” Yet minutes after that confession Jesus had to correct Peter’s false conception of what that meant and then rebuke him for trying to deflect him from his very mission. More seriously, it was Peter who, within hours of an arrogant boast that though all others would betray Jesus, he alone would remain faithful, betrayed Jesus three times, and this in Jesus’ most needy hour.

Later we are privy to the conversation Jesus has with Peter vis-à-vis those betrayals. What’s significant is that he doesn’t ask Peter to explain himself, doesn’t excuse Peter, and doesn’t say things like: “You weren’t really yourself! I can understand how anyone might be very frightened in that situation! I can empathize, I know what fear can do to you!”

None of that. The excusable doesn’t need to be excused and the inexcusable cannot be excused. In Peter’s betrayal, as in our own betrayals, there’s invariably some of both, the excusable and the inexcusable.

So what does Jesus do with Peter? He doesn’t ask for an explanation, doesn’t ask for an apology, doesn’t tell Peter that it is okay, doesn’t offer excuses for Peter, and doesn’t even tell Peter that he loves him. Instead he asks Peter: “Do you love me?” Peter answers yes – and everything moves forward from there. Everything moves forward from there. Everything can move forward following a confession of love, not least an honest confession of love in the wake of a betrayal. Apologies are necessary (because that’s taking ownership of the fault and the weakness so as to lift it completely off the soul of the one who was betrayed) but excuses are not helpful. If the action was not a betrayal, no excuse is necessary; if it was, no excuse absolves it. An excuse or an attempt at one serves two purposes, neither of them good. First, it serves to rationalize and justify, none of which is helpful to the betrayed or the betrayer. Second, it weakens the apology and makes it less than clean and full, thus not lifting the betrayal completely off the soul of the one who has been betrayed; and, because of that, is not as helpful an expression of love as is a clear, honest acknowledgement of our betrayal and an apology which attempts no excuse for its weakness and betrayal.



“Only love can move us beyond weakness and betrayal”

What love asks of us when we are weak is an honest, non-rationalized, admission of our weakness along with a statement from the heart: “I love you!”

Things can move forward from there. The past and our betrayal are not expunged, nor excused; but, in love, we can live beyond them. To expunge, excuse, or rationalize is to not live in the truth; it is unfair to the one betrayed since he or she bears the consequences and scars.

Only love can move us beyond weakness and betrayal and this is an important principle not just for those instances in life when we betray and hurt a loved one, but for our understanding of life in general. We’re human, not divine, and as such are beset, congenitally, body and mind, with weaknesses and inadequacies of every sort. None of us, as St. Paul graphically says in his Epistle to the Romans, ever quite measure up. The good we want to do, we end up not doing, and the evil we want to avoid, we habitually end up doing. Some of this, of course, is understandable, excusable, just as some of it is inexcusable, save for the fact that we’re humans and partially a mystery to ourselves. Either way, at the end of the day, no justification or excuses are asked for (or helpful). We don’t move forward in relationship by telling either God or someone we have hurt: “You have to understand! In that situation, what else was I to do too? I didn’t mean to hurt you, I was just too weak to resist!” That’s neither helpful, nor called for. Things move forward when we, without excuses, admit weakness, and apologize for betrayal. Like Peter when asked three times by Jesus:

“Do you love me?” from our hearts we need to say: “You know everything, you know that I love you.”





Lourdes 2020

In a strange sort of way, a year that looked like we would have no pilgrimage, became a year when we had what may have been one of the most memorable and meaningful.

In February, the pilgrimage leadership team returned from Lourdes, having spent five days planning all the details of our 2020 pilgrimage. We had our own meetings, as well as meetings with the Sanctuary authorities and with the management of Accueil Notre Dame. We walked the floor where our Assisted Pilgrims would stay. By the time we returned to Dublin, each step of our 2020 pilgrimage was carefully planned and our thoughts turned to the work that now must take place to make it all happen.

And then along came the Coronavirus.

At the beginning, I think each of us was very optimistic about our pilgrimage. After all, we weren't scheduled to go until the final part of the Lourdes season. However, as Easter came and went, the May pilgrimages from Ireland were cancelled and then the many June pilgrimages, it became clear that 2020 would be a year like no other. By June, our confidence about running a pilgrimage was at a low ebb and in early July, it became clear that it was not to be. Some pilgrimages, especially from June onwards, had substituted a virtual pilgrimage for their usual schedule with many of these being arranged at short notice. With that in mind, Fr Lorcán brought a small team together in early July and asked: "What about having an Oblate Virtual Lourdes Pilgrimage in September?" From that seed of an idea came a pilgrimage that will go down in people's memories for a long time to come. There was a lot of enthusiasm from an early stage. Since Rebecca joined the Communications team in Dublin, she had made her presence and skills obvious with the promotion of the pilgrimage through social media

and in 2019, used streaming technology to link those who could not be in Lourdes with the pilgrimage services taking place there. It had been a great success and it had always been the plan to extend this in 2020. And so, we had a new challenge; not to 'send' Lourdes back to those who could not be there with us but to do the reverse. Out of this was born the theme for 2020: "Bringing Lourdes Home." It could not have been a more appropriate or descriptive theme.

If our pilgrimage was to be virtual, then indeed, this was reflected in how we planned it and worked on it. We never met in person, instead, weekly we would gather on a Zoom call and consider all the different elements that would make up a virtual pilgrimage. It could not be the same as the pilgrimage that had been planned for Lourdes and so we spent a lot of time doing what we had done in February! First, we decided that the virtual pilgrimage would begin on the same day as was already planned for 2020 – September 19. At an early stage, and through contacts that had already been established in another situation, we reached out to Kairos Communications in Maynooth, a company well known for its association with RTÉ and outside broadcasting of religious events. Early on, we determined that we would have to record all the content; live broadcasting, as such, would be impossible. We had a simple daily pattern that we would follow, viz. a reflection that would go out at 8:30am every day; Mass at noon, and an evening service at 7:00pm. And so, to the task of planning each of these days.



Initially and when discussing the duration, we decided it would be three days. However, a suggestion was made that we speak with Monsignor Xavier d'Arodes, a man we know well and who is Vice-Rector of the Sanctuary. Our request: "Would it be possible to have a pilgrimage Mass said at the Grotto in Lourdes and have our large pilgrimage candle lit there?" A positive response was received very quickly and with this in mind, we decided that it would be a four-day pilgrimage. Knowing this, we then went into 'February mode' and planned each day. The OYS would lead us on the first night with a Taizé prayer service. In recent years, we had scheduled Mass on the night of our arrival in Lourdes and so it seemed very appropriate to start this year in the same way.

On September 6, Kairos Communications arrived at Inchicore before 9:30am and began to set up to record the opening Mass, the Mass for day two, and the closing ceremony, all at the Grotto in Inchicore. And we were blessed with good weather. It is true to say that we were blown away by the level of technology and preparation that Kairos Communications brought to this project. By two o'clock, all was ready, we had a small, socially-distanced and masked group and we began. It was a wonderful experience. The common feedback at the end was that we had done more than attend the recording of the Masses and closing ceremony, we had gone on pilgrimage. It was a real experience.



Next came the Mass of the Anointing, which was scheduled for recording on September 14 at Curragh Lawn Nursing Home in Kildare. The day dawned, the sun shone, the place, and it's residents were carefully prepared, and what followed was a beautiful and emotional experience. A memory that will last forever.

As they say in the movie business, it was now all, "in the can." With the assistance of Kairos Communications and led by Rebecca, all (!!) that remained was to put it together into a coherent pilgrimage, from the night of September 19 until our closing ceremony on September 24.

Hopefully for you, the reader, nothing more needs to be said as you were able to participate. The feedback has been amazing. We had people who went on pilgrimage with us not just from the Anglo-Irish Province of the Oblates but from all over the world. We had feedback from the U.S., from France, Italy, from people who had never been to Lourdes and may never get the opportunity. One woman texted: "Congratulations to the Oblate family on a really wonderful, prayerful, and happy virtual pilgrimage to Lourdes. I watched each and every Mass and prayer, and rosary. Really felt I was there." Another: "I understand what Bernadette said when asked in Nevers, would she miss the Grotto, and she said she didn't need

to visit it as she carried it in her heart. I loved and lived every day of the virtual pilgrimage." Yet another: "Showing photos during the memorial

section for those who died in the last year was inspired. Very very emotional, but wonderful. Felt I said a 'goodbye' to each and everyone." We could fill pages with the feedback. And let's remember that while we always spoke of the 'virtual' pilgrimage, each day of the pilgrimage, from September 19 thru 24, Fr Vincent was lighting a pilgrimage candle, and he, along with the community, were praying for people's intentions.

In a strange sort of way, a year that looked like we would have no pilgrimage, became a year when we had what may have been one of the most memorable and meaningful. The Oblate Lourdes Pilgrimage has moved from ship and train, to plane, and now online; it is an evolving journey but always with the same destination. Who knows what 2021 will bring but in 2020, we learned what it is to "Bring Lourdes Home" and with that lesson, we know that we are ready, whatever 2021 wants to throw at us.

– Gerard Bennett

If you missed the pilgrimage it is still available to view online at:
www.oblates.ie/virtual-lourdes-pilgrimage-2020

Being Close to the People When it is Most Needed

–Belarus, Reported by an Oblate in Belarus



During those terrible days, I was in the Grodno region together with my family. It was there I went for voting. On the election day evening, I went to Grodno city and all I saw was a massive crowd of protesters in the city center. In about a dozen or so minutes, the “OMON” appeared (Special Purpose Mobile Unit of the military). Soon they would form a “wall of shields”. People suddenly began to withdraw. I was caught totally unawares, and suddenly I found myself left alone in the square. And “the wall” was getting closer and closer... I walked away slowly and sat down on a nearby bench. Otherwise, they would have certainly knocked me out. They searched for those with a white-red-white flag (flag of independent Belarus). A drone flew overhead, so they knew who was escaping and where. I did not stay there too long. While returning home, I saw how the buses and special transport cars were jam-packed with innocent people trying to escape an imminent life threat.

However, people reorganized themselves again the next day and I could not resist taking part in the protests. This time the militia blocked the access to the city center. However, all the city residents began blowing their car horns and flashed the signal lights, as a sign of protest and in support of protesters. Literally everyone... of course me too. The next day, I drove to the city again with another companion. My intention was solely to be in solidarity with the mass rally of people who were back in the streets protesting peacefully against the disputed election. They drove around, sounding their horns everywhere. They shouted “Long Live Belarus!” It was an amazing atmosphere to witness.

At some point people started to diverge. I did not see anyone hostile immediately, but somehow I automatically nodded to my companion and we ran to the car. We sat inside the car and I locked it. Two buses with OMON has arrived. One of them stopped right beside our car. The OMON -men jumped out of bus and started running literally like dogs broken off a chain, just to catch someone. First, they did not notice us, but when they finally surrounded us (there were about 10 men of them), I realized that something had to be done. They beat the car with truncheons on all sides. They shouted, “Come out.” On my side, one of them tried to smash the car-window with his fist or elbow, and on the other side other they hit the window with a club... and as soon as the glass was broken, the militiaman grabbed my companion by his chest. In that split second, I started driving with a screech of tires. I turned back, and my companion has somehow managed to jump over to the back seat! How he did it, I do not know. With Angels’ help, we were saved. Otherwise, we would have shared the same fate of many who were tortured and beaten.

Now I am back in our mission station in Shumilino and I have already taken part in the protests here. When the hour comes, we need to be ready to take life risks, for the sake of our people. Let me also add that I engage in these peaceful protests with permission and blessing of the bishop. We, the small community of Oblates, organized additional prayers in our Oblate parishes. And we also support protesters by spiritual guidance, if they come to talk about this situation. For this moment, all Oblates are safe and serve in our mission stations as usual.

I ask my Oblate brothers to pray for Belarus and for us Oblates living here in particular. Our people and country need your spiritual support very much. May we understand God’s Holy Will amidst this entire calamity!

[Return to Contents Page](#)

Starting a New Mission in a Time of Covid-19

Lessons from Covid-19

– Fr. Parunanthu Vimalrajan, OMI

When I landed at Heathrow airport on Jan 24th from Sri Lanka, I noticed that some of the passengers were moving around wearing masks. I did not understand the reason for wearing masks. At that time I did not have much knowledge of Covid-19 but already I knew that something was going on in China. I thought this was China's problem, so why worry?. This was my mentality. But I was keenly observing what was happening in China. Then slowly the pandemic crept into Italy, and at that time I was deeply worried about Italy because I had lived in Italy for six years. After staying for some time in London, I left for Wales. I heard the bad news that the pandemic had started to creep into the United Kingdom. Earlier this pandemic was China's problem but later it was our problem, specifically my problem.

Covid-19 forced us to live in panic. The whole world is afraid of an invisible enemy. We never experienced such an awful situation in our lives. Everything came to a standstill. In fact some had started to think that this was the end of the world. No one had an answer for this turmoil. Uncertainty was the only answer.

During this lock down I started to reflect that something is more powerful than this world. My faith became very much stronger. I started to believe firmly that beyond our knowledge there is a power. Our lives are not in our hands. We are just human beings. There is nothing to boast about ourselves.

Death is very much closer to us. There is a short period of time between birth and death. Each one has to live their life fully by counting the days. We need to live peacefully with everyone because we are not going to live long in this world. The discoveries of humanity were powerless before this arrogant pandemic. Humanity has to become more humble in accepting its inability to face such new problems. This cruel pandemic forced people to think only of 'survival'. Sometimes I was frustrated when reflecting about death. The frustration is focussed on finding the meaning of our existence.



During this lock down I had ample time to organize certain things. I started to read books and to write reflections on social media in my language Tamil. I have musical instruments in my room and continued to play those instruments. Using my talent I started to compose songs to be uploaded on social media. Collaboratively I worked with new friends in producing songs and other projects.

In Wales, I have had more time to go out for physical exercise. I made use of this chance to climb some mountains. I have learnt to cook varieties of food. Since Fr. Frank Ryan OMI was not able to go out, I valued this as a God-given opportunity and used it for mission like officiating at funeral services and visiting the sick in the hospitals. Live streaming was another opportunity to reach people and to continue the spiritual activities.

This lock down was a blessing for me to search for the meaning of our lives. The uncertainty of this life brought me certain revelations of understanding the power of God. We are just humans. We have limitations. We need to live happily in this world. I was again and again reminded of the two commandments, that is to love God and love our neighbour. This simple theory is enough for us to live peacefully in this world.

And also still I believe that man will find a suitable vaccine to save the world. In history he has won many trials through his fruitful discoveries.

- Parunanthu Vimalrajan from Sri Lanka (known as Vimal) was ordained in 2006 and until the start of this year was based in Sicily where he worked with Sri Lankan immigrants.

Over the last year, three new Oblates arrived in Britain and we invited them to share their reflections on their experience to date.

Being an Oblate and a Missionary in the time of the Covid Pandemic

– Irvin T. Morastil, OMI



Barely a year into a new missionary territory, Covid19 pandemic struck! Public gatherings were banned and restricted. Public transport was suspended. Churches even were ordered closed and public Masses were not allowed. Literally, it feels like the world was at a halt.

As a missionary who is always outgoing, I find the lockdown difficult. Deep within, I resist the idea that I am being prevented from doing even the usual “priestly duties” I need to do such as visiting the sick and giving them Holy Communion.

Initially, there was that great defiance within me that I will not allow this virus to hinder me in doing my priestly duties. It took a parishioner to open my mind to the reality of this virus. “You may be okay with the virus. But how about the vulnerable people you are going to visit?” The thought of me bringing the virus to others and having them infected really terrified me. And this is what makes this pandemic even more tragic for me.

Thankfully, as an Oblate and a missionary, we are always taught that there is “no ministry alien” to us and we can always be creative in finding new ways how to minister to our people given the unprecedented circumstances. And reluctantly, we have intensified our initiatives of providing spiritual support and connections to our people through the use of social media platforms.

We are not as technologically literate, as many of our parishioners are! But responding to the call and signs of the times, we have managed this aspect very well. With the support and assistance of our Oblate Youth in the Philippines we were able to develop and sustain our “Oblate connections” bringing the celebration of the Holy Eucharist (with emphasis on Spiritual Communion) and make the Word of God accessible to the people bringing comfort and hope amidst this global crisis and pandemic.



The prayers and reflections we have provided online with our people made them realize that indeed, given the difficult circumstances, we remain present with them and we are one with them.

Looking at it more deeply though, the new normal has invited us to re-evaluate and re-assess a new missionary paradigm and missionary outlook. For so long a time, we have developed a strong sense of a Church-centric spirituality. That in a way, for many people and families, the Church has simply become an extension of their homes. With the pandemic, as more and more families gathered together at home to celebrate the Eucharist and pray together, we are now able to rediscover a domestic Church, a Church that is very much present in the homes. After all, the early Christian communities celebrated the Breaking of the Bread in their homes.

There is a common temptation though that instead of us being used by God as an instrument to promote His Words and Teachings and in order to make Jesus known and loved; we have used Jesus’ words and teachings to promote ourselves instead!

Irvin T. Morastil, OMI was born and grew up in Southern Philippines and was Ordained in November 2, 2009. For the last five years he has worked as Director, Oblate Youth & Family Ministries in the Philippines.



Helping myself and people stay positive by being close to nature during these difficult times

- Fr. Johnson Susairaj, OMI

The blessings God has given me in my life are numerous and I can indeed recognise them in the gifts I have been given. Seeing that I have answered the call to religious life, I feel that my every breath is a gift from God and I choose to live out this gift through the service of others and it also enables my own personal growth. As a child of God, I feel His compassionate presence and blessings each day of my life.

The ongoing global pandemic of Covid-19 has shaken the faith of many of our brothers and sisters around the world and countless people find it hard to cope with this resulting unprecedented situation since many people have died with it. So one may ask: where do I see myself in all of this? I have been shaken up quite a bit, as I am finding it difficult to see 'light at the end of the tunnel' for this pandemic to end. Amidst so much of internal as well as external fear and terror caused by Covid-19, I have gathered some courage to reflect upon my life and have found opportunities to help people stay positive in these challenging times. A prime example of this, would be that of using my skills and expertise with gardening and growing of flowers in the front area of the presbytery. The huge sunflowers attracted the gaze, attention and appreciation of the visiting homeless people, the local Kilburn Oblate community as well as parishioners who came by to obtain mass cards and deliver food for the foodbank. I am fortunate that the garden project has brought numerous blessings. It has had a therapeutic effect during the lockdown.



I became aware that when I am busy gardening and growing plants and flowers, I noticed that I forget about everything! Especially things that worry and frustrate me, self-isolation, coronavirus restrictions, closure of the church, no sacraments available for people and also the recent death of my own uncle in India, at whose funeral I could not be at with my family.

During the beginning of the pandemic, my Oblate brothers encouraged me to spend some time in the garden as well as in the kitchen cooking; both of which have given me a lot of positive energy. When I was in the garden, I loved to observe the flowering of the plants from its buds sprouting to the growing of fresh leaves on its shoots. It is miraculous, and these little events helped me to recognise the presence of God that is active and alive amidst the chaos and dilemmas that the world is experiencing as a result of Covid-19. The garden is blessed with a lot of birds, since we have placed a new water feature in it. Due to the lockdown, cars were fewer on the road, and the neighbourhood was calmer and less noisier.

The silence present in nature allows me to hear the melodious sounds of the birds which is so soothing for the senses. The song of the birds indeed prepares me with calmness and patience, and I am pleasantly surprised how the day proceeds with ease. Nature has shown me a marvellous way as it poured out and nourished within me a lot of positivity, and I could not have asked for a better environment for personal reflection and prayer during the recent lockdown.

I would like to conclude by saying that when I am close to nature, it helps me to think creatively, act positively and live authentically as an Oblate along with my brothers and sisters here on earth.

Johnson Susairaj was ordained to the priesthood in 2016. Prior to his arrival he worked a number of different parishes in his native India and was involved in their preaching ministry.

New & Challenging Times at Wistaston Hall

Here at Wistaston Hall we strive to offer a place where you find peace, rest, and an opportunity for prayer away from the stresses of life. Unfortunately, on the evening of Sunday 9th August, this was put to the test as there was an electrical fire here. Thankfully, no one was injured, and no guests were here at the time. It is thanks to the quick response of the Fire Brigade, who arrived on the scene within ten minutes, the fire did not take hold fully. The five fire engines speeding up the drive was the most exciting thing to happen in Wistaston for a long time, some of our neighbours even ventured down their drives to watch as the drama unfolded.

However, even though the fire did not spread through the whole house, the damage did not end with the two rooms that were gutted. The entire electrical system for the house has had to be removed, leaving us without power for a least a few months, meaning we are going to be closed to visitors here for a while. As the cold weather approaches, social distancing around the gas heaters might become a little difficult. We have realised how much we take for granted now that we have no electricity on site. There is also a significant amount of smoke damage, which made its way through corridors and ceilings. The Hall has been turned upside down, and many of those who come here regularly would struggle to recognise it now. The lack of people here only makes the feelings of sadness at the fire itself worse as we walk around our almost empty building; the Hall is not the same without the many groups we welcome back year after year.

The fire came at a particularly difficult time for us, as we were preparing to reopen after lockdown, just as we were ready to get up and running the decision was taken out of our hands. Through all this Fr Lorcan, Rachel and Nick continue to be on site and try to carry on as normal as much as possible. It may be hard for us now, but this will not last forever.



It's not all doom and gloom here at Wistaston, the building works on the Grange and the Frank Morrissey OMI buildings are continuing on, it will be unrecognisable, not because of the events of the past but because of all the amazing and exciting things that are planned for the future. Speakers planned for 2021 include among others Fr Ron Rolheiser, Sr Kathleen Bryant and David Wells. Please visit our website for further details: www.orc-crewe.org

It will take more than a fire to stop us, we are determined to make Wistaston Hall the welcoming and vibrant place all those who stay with us have come to know and love.

- Rachel Challoner



Some Secrets Worth Knowing

Monks have secrets worth knowing, and these can be invaluable when a coronavirus pandemic is forcing millions of us to live like monks.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, millions of us have been forced to stay at home, work from home, practice social distancing from everyone except those in our own houses and have minimal social contact with the outside. In a manner of speaking, this has turned many of us into monks, like it or not. What's the secret to thrive there?

Well, I'm not a monk, nor a mental health expert, so what I share here isn't exactly the rule of St. Benedict or a series of professional mental health tips. It's the fruit of what I've learned from monks and from living in the give-and-take of a religious community for fifty years.

Here are ten counsels for living when we are, in effect, housebound, that is, living in a situation wherein we don't have a lot of privacy, have to do a lot of living within a very small circle, face long hours wherein we have to struggle to find things that energize us, and wherein we find ourselves for good stretches of time frustrated, bored, impatient, and lethargic. How does one survive and thrive in that situation?

1. Create a routine.

That's the key. It's what monks do. Create a detailed routine for the hours of your day as you would a financial budget. Make this very practical: list the things you need to do each day and slot them into a concrete timetable and then stick to that as a discipline, even when it seems rigid and oppressive. Resist the temptation to simply go with the flow of your energy and mood or to lean on entertainment and whatever distractions can be found to get you through your days and nights.

2. Wash and dress your body each day, as if you were going out into the world and meeting people. Resist the temptation to cheat on hygiene, dress, and make-up. Don't spend the morning in your pajamas: wash and dress-up. When you don't do this, what are you saying to your family? They aren't worth the effort? And what are you saying to yourself? I'm not worth the effort? Slovenliness invariably becomes lethargy and acedia.

3. Look beyond yourself and your needs each day to see others and their hurts and frustrations. You're not in this alone; the others are enduring exactly what you are. Nothing will make your day harder to endure than excessive self-focus and self-pity.

4. Find a place to be alone for some time every day and offer others that same courtesy. Don't apologize that you need time away, to be by yourself. That's an imperative for mental health, not a selfish claim. Give others that space. Sometimes you need to be apart, not just for your own sake but for the sake of the others. Monks live an intense community life, but each also has a private cell within which to retreat.

5. Have a contemplative practice each day that includes prayer.

On the schedule you create for yourself, mark in at least a half hour or an hour each day for some contemplative practice: pray, read scripture, read from a serious book, journal, paint a picture, paint a fence, create an artifact, fix something, garden, write poetry, write a song, begin a memoir, write a long letter to someone you haven't seen for years, whatever; but do some something that's freeing for your soul and have it include some prayer.



Sometimes you need to be apart, not just for your own sake but for the sake of the others.

6. Practice “Sabbath” daily.

Sabbath need not be a day; it can be an hour. Give yourself something very particular to look forward to each day, something enjoyable and sensual: a hot bath, a glass of wine, a cigar on the patio, a rerun of a favorite old sitcom, a nap in the shade in a lawn chair, anything – as long as it’s done purely for enjoyment. Make this a discipline.

7. Practice “Sabbath” weekly.

Make sure that only six days of the week are locked into your set routine. Break the routine once a week. Set one day apart for enjoyment, one day when you may eat pancakes for breakfast in your pajamas.

8. Challenge yourself with something new.

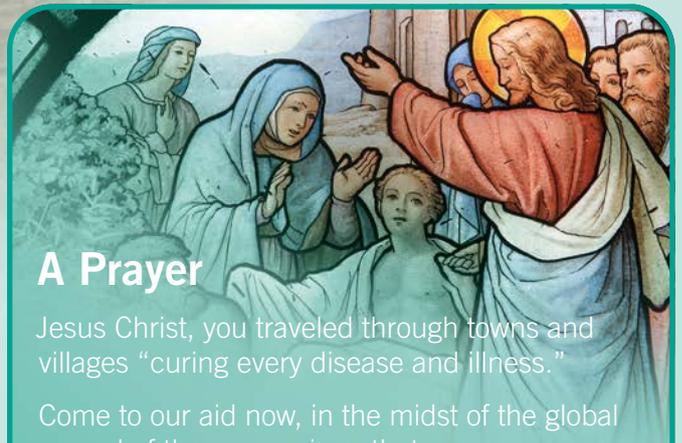
Stretch yourself by trying something new. Learn a new language, take up a new hobby, learn to play an instrument. This is an opportunity you’ve never had.

9. Talk through the tensions that arise within your house – though carefully.

Tensions will arise when living in a fishbowl. Monks have community meetings to sort out those tensions. Talk tensions through honestly with each other, but carefully; hurtful remarks sometimes never quite heal.

10. Take care of your body.

We aren’t disembodied spirits. Be attentive to your body. Get enough exercise each day to keep your body energized. Be careful not to use food as a compensation for your enforced monasticism. Monks are careful about their diet – except on feast days



A Prayer

Jesus Christ, you traveled through towns and villages “curing every disease and illness.”

Come to our aid now, in the midst of the global spread of the coronavirus, that we may experience your healing love.

Heal those who are sick with the virus. May they regain their strength and health through quality medical care.

Heal us from our fear, which prevents neighbours from helping one another.

Jesus Christ, healer of all, stay by our side in this time of uncertainty and sorrow.

Be with the doctors, nurses, researchers and all medical professionals who seek to heal and help those affected and who put themselves at risk in the process. May they know your protection and peace.

Whether we are home or abroad, Jesus Christ, stay with us as we endure and mourn, persist and prepare.

In place of our anxiety, give us your peace.

Jesus Christ, heal us. Amen



Fr John Noble, OMI 1823-1867

– From the Archives

Just a year ago Pope Francis wrote a letter to encourage our parish priests – men who had “quietly ‘left all behind’” to immerse themselves in the daily life of their communities, to “serve “in the trenches”, bearing the burden and the heat of the day, confronting an endless variety of situations.”

Could there be a better way to describe what an Oblate priest or Brother is called to be and to do? - to leave all behind, - to be immersed in the daily life of the people – to serve “in the trenches” – to bear the heat and burden of the day – to confront an endless variety of situations in a days’ work – but not only in a parish context, rather: in an endless variety of contexts!

Plunging into the hectic beginnings of our Oblate mission in Britain and Ireland, John Noble lived such a life as this. It was hectic. For example, in 1847 and 1848, six new mission stations were started in England and four were abandoned almost immediately. Even before his ordination in 1847, John Noble was helping Father Cooke in his open-air missions in the Leicestershire countryside and being “confronted with an endless variety of situations”! He was assisting in Everingham in Yorkshire in 1848. In 1849 he was in Maryvale (‘Old Oscott’), then in a new Manchester parish and then in Aldenham. At the end of 1849 he took part in a preached mission in Liverpool, following which the Bishop confided the district and chapel of Holy Cross to the Oblates. What a hectic story that was! Father Noble lived and worked here among the desperately poor. He built a large school. Overworked, he fell sick in 1854 and was summoned to Marseilles by St. Eugene, where he stayed convalescing until February 1855. On his return, off he went with Father Cooke in the search for a house in Dublin for a permanent mission there. He preached several missions, notably in Bradford and Dublin. In 1856 he was elected by his colleagues to go as a delegate to the General Chapter in Marseilles.

On his return from the Chapter, another new world opened to him - Scotland. He was named superior of the community in Galashiels in Scotland, but continued to preach missions, notably in Thurles, County Tipperary in Ireland.

What a mission that was! The five missionaries - Cooke, Noble, Fox, Ryan and Gubbins - arrived in Thurles on 17 July 1858. The Inchicore Diary reports: “The Fathers had never seen such a crowd of people attending their instructions as in Thurles... the confessionals were besieged from morning till evening and it happened that there were those who went to the chapel to receive the holy Sacraments three successive days and could not be heard before the third day. It may be said that there were every day about 500 to receive the Holy Communion, between six and seven hundred adults were confirmed and the cathedral although containing 4000 people was too small for the crowds.”

The closure of the mission in Thurles is described in the Tipperary Examiner:

“...never since O’Connell held his monster meeting at Knockroe, outside this town, was there so large an assemblage here as on this occasion. From six o’clock in the morning the people poured in their peaceful might until twelve, when the streets became literally impassable. ...At half-past ten o’clock today the holy Fathers were accompanied to the railway station by a vast multitude, when they started for Dublin, amid the heartfelt tears and sighs of the good people who, on bended knees, testified their respect for them.”



One of the group commented later: “Only someone who participated in the missions given by our Fathers ...could have any idea of the crushing workload they had to undertake. Prolonged hours in the confessional late into the night, rising early, no rest day, scarcely having the time to say the divine office, the immense crowds of people, packed churches, and often uncomfortable lodgings ...”

When the Oblates had to leave Galashiels to take on ‘Star of the Sea Leith’, it was John Noble who took charge. Fr John preached with success in the towns and countryside of Scotland and was an active member of the provincial council.

In 1867, from 30 March to 1 April, there was perpetual adoration in Star of the Sea. On the last evening, Father Noble, tired out, chatted for a while with Brother John Atkinson and then, suffering from insomnia, went out for a night-time walk on the docks. He met a Catholic policeman and they too had a long chat. Later, it seems Fr John failed to see a chain stretched out on the quay and stumbled and fell into the water and drowned. His body was found in the morning of 2 April, with injuries to his arm and right foot.

Father Noble was only 43 and he was mourned by all classes of society. The funeral was celebrated on 5 April by Bishop Strain, vicar apostolic of Eastern District, Scotland. He was buried inside the church in Leith.

After Father Noble’s death, his colleague Father Arnoux wrote a long letter to the superior general Father Fabre. He spoke of John Noble’s zeal, his gifts as a preacher, his affability - he “was very well thought of by the clergy and catholic aristocracy of Scotland. He always behaved well in their eyes, and generally in everyone’s eyes with much circumspection. Finally, he concludes, It is a pity that he had some tendency inside himself that prevented him following a more regular way of life.”

The tension between “confronting an endless variety of situations” and “following a regular way of life” will always be with the Oblate. But didn’t Our Lord himself once ‘break his retreat’ to attend to the needs of the multitude?

– Michael Hughes, OMI



A Poet's Insight

They laugh and play
and run around and say, "That's retarded,"
overheard by the child who just wants, for once,
what they could call a good day.
The child who was born incomprehensible pain.

Ableism,
The discrimination or social prejudice against
people with disabilities.
It finds its way from back in the day
when the "ugly laws" kept disabled children from
play and we've come too far for you to turn
around and say
"That's retarded,".

Its revolting to me
how we can treat people this way
and I can only hope for people one day
will appreciate diversity, and give people chances
that they will not fear what is different,
as humans cannot ask to be born a certain way.
There is no cure or fixing that needs to be done,
just some steps
one by one.

Something every day for us
like boarding a bus
could be a small victory for someone else,
and refusing to understand someone's small delay
will only take their trophy away,
because you people think it's OK to say things like
"That's retarded,".

You alienate and demean people to
something less than human
they have blood in their veins, and experiences
you can't fathom.
You'll never know what it is like to be judged
to be beaten, banned, and barred and be told what
you can and can't be,
To be diminished to nothing
and compared to something
far lower than a human's true worth
when you say
"That's retarded,".

Cormac is a young man from Sacred Heart parish,
Kilburn in London, who is visually impaired. He is
an amazing young man and is a member of the
Saturday Afternoon Club, a group for young people
with additional needs. He wrote this challenging
poem based on his own experience.



Humanity is the only thing that thinks that they're
a good idea.
And you think it's completely fine to say
"That's retarded,".

I hope for you to never have to feel that way,
to have people stare,
side-eye,
and glare,
when you go out to the shop with your friends
beside you, and having to hear some person say
"That's retarded,".

To have all their courage,
all their imagination,
their creativity,
personality,
and whole life put to shame
because their bodies and minds were formed in a
different way
when someone decides to say
"That's retarded,".