Coronavirus
Religious Life



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As the pandemic throws a metaphorical grenade into the everyday habits of people around the world, the consistent and faith-bolstering rhythm of daily Mass, frequent prayer, quiet recreation and humble ministry is serving New Orleans' community of Poor Clare Sisters very well.

The five sisters who reside at the contemplative religious community's monastery in the city report that their days, while certainly impacted by the coronavirus, have

been fundamentally unchanged since the sheltering-in-place order.

"Everybody is supposed to be apart but together during this pandemic, but that's what we do all the time; we are apart (from the world) but together," said Sr. Charlene Toups, abbess of the local community of Poor Clares, which includes a sixth sister who lives at Our Lady of Wisdom Healthcare Center.

"Finding rhythms is a very important thing, as is creating space for one another in a tight situation, even if it's psychological space," Toups said.

Giving the Poor Clares their built-in rhythm is the Liturgy of the Hours, which provides readings and prayers at various times of the day and into the evening. The sisters' communal day begins at 7 a.m. when they gather for morning prayer, followed by private daily Mass in their chapel — or whenever a priest can make it to their home during these weeks of social distancing. The sisters stay at least 6 feet apart in the pews, and on days a priest cannot celebrate Mass with them, they watch the Mass remotely.

Peppered between prayer times are the tasks and joys of everyday living: the sharing of meals, recreation, exercise and individual reading and reflection time — all mostly carried out within the confines of their monastery's grounds.

"We're blessed because we have a big house," said Toups, noting that she and her fellow sisters do leave their home to perform essential tasks such as shopping and to access faith-based activities such as lectures and other activities related to their vocations as women religious.

A small exercise room provides space for fitness activities, and they take advantage of the expansive grounds for walking and gardening. Whenever they can, the sisters bypass the elevator to take the stairs in their three-story home.

"One of the things about the monastery is that it's normally a quiet place," noted Sr. Julie Glaeser. "But we do keep in touch with what's happening with the world — we read the newspaper; we watch evening news together so we know who to pray for.

"But don't have the news on 24/7 because that can be very depressing," Glaeser cautioned.

Although the coronavirus guidelines have forced the sisters to temporarily suspend their monastery-based feeding ministry, it has not impacted the sisters' telephone

ministry, in which people call the sisters to express their concerns and prayer requests, or just to talk. The sisters also call people in need, to check in on them from time to time.

"We preserve a spirit of prayer and devotion, but that doesn't mean you don't talk," Toups said, sharing guidelines she learned as a young sister on how to make that talk pleasing to God. Before speaking, ask yourself three questions: Is it necessary? Is it helpful? Is it upbuilding?

"If you stop and think about that, you'll keep your mouth shut a lot of the time," Toups said, chuckling.

Poor Clare Sister Rita Hickey said her community is often misunderstood as distant.

"We never hung our hat on the 'cloistered' idea. People get fascinated about that," Hickey told the Clarion Herald, newspaper of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. "We always consider ourselves contemplative, which means dedicated to prayer and dedicated to living in the presence of God. And everyone is with you when you're in the presence of God."

Of course, everyone, even the most prayerful, suffers the sting of loneliness in various degrees at some point, the sisters said.

"You can be in a room full of people and feel very alone, especially if you're going through something internally," Toups notes. "And it doesn't make it any easier just because you're in a convent. We have to do the things any human being would do. One thing to do is to take it into prayer — to be where you're not alone; you're with God. And then also to talk it out with somebody if you need to."

Glaeser said that when she feels a "pity party" coming on in the age of COVID-19, she preempts those negative thoughts by doing "something constructive," such as sewing masks or working in the garden.

"I think people will discover a strength within themselves that they didn't know they had," said Glaeser.

Hickey said another silver lining of the pandemic has been how Catholics have understood their craving for Mass and the Eucharist like never before, now that they aren't readily available.

Social distancing and quarantine have presented all with "a wonderful opportunity to learn the value of silence an opportunity to grow in that," Toups said.

"Hopefully, (people will) discover the difference between solitude and isolation; they're not the same thing," she added.

Meanwhile, Catholics need look no further for fortification than the role models of their faith who are preserved in Scripture and in church history, the sisters said.

Of course, there is Jesus, who went through the most horrific experiences any human should be expected to endure. But the Poor Clares also suggested turning to the lessons embodied by the Blessed Mother.

Toups said her home's small statue of Mary sweeping with a broom is a powerful reminder of the Blessed Mother's down-to-earth tenacity. But the image of Mary she is seeing in her mind, more and more during these days of pandemic, is the one of Mary standing at the foot of Jesus' cross.

"She is there for her son. She is there for the world, really; she's is taking our place at the foot of the cross," Toups said.

"There is absolutely nothing she can do except be there, and in many ways, that's what we are all doing — we are all at the foot of the cross, helpless," she said. "But Mary didn't have a pity party. She stood!"

The Poor Clare nuns reside in about 40 monasteries in the United States. There are 18,000 Poor Clares worldwide. The New Orleans community's website is at www.poorclarenuns.com.

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