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Religious Life



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How is the coronavirus affecting your community? Submit an example we may use in future coverage.

In the middle of March, I, like many others, was stunned by the swift unfolding of the coronavirus pandemic. I will never forget the day I first understood the seriousness of the crisis. It was March 10, and I was supposed to travel to New York City with one of my sisters. Several hours before we were to board a plane to La Guardia, we decided not to go as we began seeing the number of cases growing in the New York area. This was the first of many workshops, meetings and travel plans that were canceled.

In the week that followed this decision, everything changed. Once I started working from home, my world became very small. Now the only people I see on a daily basis are my sisters in community. Weekends and evenings are freer than they have been in years. I haven't traveled more than 2 miles away from my house in weeks. I can't remember the last time I drove a car.

As I have begun to reflect on how small my world has become and how free my days have been, I've realized: This is another novitiate time.

For those of you who don't know what novitiate is, it is one of the beginning stages of formation for becoming a religious brother or sister. In the novitiate, you trade a full-time ministry for full-time prayer and study. The amount of time you spend outside the novitiate is restricted as well, and the number of days is actually legislated by canon law.

In fact, if a novice spends too many days away from the novitiate, he or she has to repeat it. To say the least, the novitiate is an intense time of spiritual and personal formation. It is challenging but wholly necessary in the process of becoming a religious.

When I was a novice, a Marianist brother (and major "Star Wars" fan) compared the novitiate to a scene in "The Empire Strikes Back." Luke Skywalker stumbles upon a cave while he is in the forest training to be a Jedi. "What's in there?" he asks Yoda, the Jedi master training him. "Only what you take with you," Yoda responds.

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When Luke enters the darkness of the cave, he goes alone. And in that empty cave, he is confronted by the things that haunt him: his past, his relationship with Darth Vader, and his own propensity to be drawn toward the Dark Side.

Not to make too much of a point, but this brother was right: The novitiate is kind of like that cave. All the "extra" stuff in your life is stripped away. Without all the busyness and activity of ministry, you have no choice but to face your own fears, anxieties, darkness and woundedness. And although a novice does live with others in a religious community, the novitiate year is still an experience of standing alone before God and being confronted with one's identity and purpose.

Right now, many people in our society — religious and lay — are being asked to enter into this novitiate time. Without having our days filled with bustle and activity, we are being confronted with the same question posed by the novitiate: *Who am I apart from what I do?*

Grappling with this question can be painful, especially for those of us in the United States where being overworked is a virtue and busy-ness is a point of pride. This is no less true for those of us in apostolic religious life.

Just like in the novitiate, there are many temptations to avoid taking advantage of the extra time and space to ask these difficult questions. It is tempting to fill this time with other distractions. For example, few things in my world are more enjoyable and relaxing than hanging out and watching Netflix. And it is so easy to waste time going down a YouTube rabbit hole or scrolling through social media.

But when this pandemic and time of social distancing is over, I would like to be able to say that I didn't squander this time. I'd like to say that I used it as an opportunity to revisit my novitiate experience, to reconnect with God in prayer, to face my own feelings of anxiety, helplessness, frustration and worry at the massive number of people dying of COVID-19, especially those in the most marginalized groups in our nation.

So let's not waste this novitiate time. Let us enter the emptiness of the cave and emerge with a renewed sense of hope in the goodness of God and God's people.

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