Opinion
Spirituality
News



A woman wearing a protective face mask kisses a cross as she prays from the window of her home in Turin, Italy, March 25. (CNS/Reuters/Massimo Pinca)

by Rebecca Collins Jordan

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Over the past few weeks, I've started to feel a little cloistered — haven't you? Shut into my home all day except for a brief walking respite, I have come to know these walls and windows well. And, in the midst of my isolation, I have started to reframe my reality to tolerate it better and to call it a temporary monastic calling.

I'm not usually one for routines, but for whatever reason — probably panic and distraction — I have picked up an elaborate one during this time of social distancing. I wake up, eat breakfast with my partner, Brendan, check the news, call family. I settle down for my usual eight hours of work as a teacher, sending the same emails, checking in with my same high school students and creating similar, though simpler and more tech-savvy, assignments. I teach religion, so we still have our moment of silent meditation and a few mantras that end the class, just now via video chat. After work, I walk, avoiding proximity to others, so that I can reach a little footbridge in a park with some ducks and songbirds. I eat dinner, amazed and grateful that there is food. I read. I worry. I Skype a friend, perhaps someone I haven't talked to in a while. Sometimes, before bed, I Google "how to help from home," looking for a new article with new donation suggestions. I fall asleep.

It seems I'm not the only one with a routine. Lately, at 7 p.m. on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, New York, people lean out their window and step onto their balconies to clap together for medical and essential service workers. The applause and cheering are all I can hear from all directions in those few minutes. In a city known for its culture of tardiness, people are remarkably punctual.

I think people are craving routine right now, precisely because the world seems so on edge, so unpredictable. In this craving, I see echoes of the monastic life of *ora et labora* (work and prayer). St. Benedict, too, lived in an unpredictable world, filled with threats of war and political instability. His world-changing response was to *stay home,* to work on behalf of the world, making textiles, farming food, tending to sickness.

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The monks and nuns who joined the Benedictine movement followed suit, living in community but also living deeply alone and in silence. They found tentative but not absolute safety in their walled monasteries and within them they created a routine of purposeful distraction from fear.

In Oregon, where I am from, the abbot of Mount Angel Abbey once said to a room of us, "The monastery is always there for the world, not for itself."

Through the ages, the monastic life — across religions, actually — has stood not only as a fortress of protection, but also of prayerful hospitality. In my mother's home "monastery," she produces medical masks from Tyvek material while Zooming with friends. In a friend's home "monastery," she reads a chapter from *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer every night live on Facebook to give friends a connection to the nonhuman world. Two other friends sing show tunes every day to share with others.

It strikes me that in my own "monastery," I have been so quick to work — to grade papers, to plan lessons, to find places that need donations, to clean, to *wash my hands* — and not as quick to pray. How ironic that, with all this free time, the discipline of prayer is still a challenge. I don't think I am alone, though — in a culture such as the United States, people are quick to work and act and slow to reflect and breathe.

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Now, though, we have nothing if not time to pray. The work is always there, but the time to pray is not. We have so many opportunities to fill our day and enrich our spiritual lives, instead of bumbling through our tasks and succumbing to boredom. In our time of isolation is an opportunity for true spiritual communion, and maybe — just perhaps? — a time to look into the worldly benefit of prayer.

I am, I assume like many people out there, restless despite my activity. I experience bursts of cabin fever and anxiety that have become companions. But perhaps prayer is also what I am called to do. Perhaps it is time to go deep into myself on behalf of the world. Perhaps my elaborate routine is a good strategy, an expression of connection from afar, that can be paired with the deeper spiritual practices I tend to avoid.

In a world of uncertainty, perhaps it is a comfort to know that our lonely time is not a new and strange one, but an old and tradition-tested one that is exalted, respected and sought out. We, as modern and active laity, have a calling to *ora et labora.* That's a distraction I can get behind.

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