News



Cardinal Michael Czerny, undersecretary for the Vatican's Migrants and Refugees Section, stands on the terrace of the Jesuit residence in Rome April 22, 2020, where he lives and, during the coronavirus lockdown, works. (CNS/courtesy Cardinal Czerny)

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Cardinal Michael Czerny, undersecretary for the Vatican's Migrants and Refugees Section, stands on the terrace of the Jesuit residence in Rome April 22, 2020, where he lives and, during the coronavirus lockdown, works. (CNS/courtesy Cardinal Czerny)

Pope Francis has expressed his hope that the post-pandemic world would be marked by more solidarity, concern for others, care for the environment, an appreciation of the church as a community and a sharpening of people's listening skills.

In April, as Italy and the Vatican moved toward their seventh week in lockdown, Catholic News Service asked several people for their "post-pandemic resolutions." Most of them mirror the pope's hopes, at least on an individual level.

"Working remotely all day, every day has nearly become normal, but when the COVID-19 pandemic is over, I look forward to rediscovering the face-to-face and the side-by-side," said Cardinal Michael Czerny, undersecretary for the Vatican's Migrants and Refugees Section.

The cardinal said he was impressed with how people adapted to the stay-at-home orders.

"During lockdown, observing many different people everywhere quickly making momentous changes to meet great challenges and dangerous threats, has both elevated and concretized my hope," he said. Post-pandemic, "I hope that our astonishing human capacity for change will morph into fundamental conversions in how we work, consume, commune, care for our common home and even pray."

Callista Gingrich, the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, said she, too, has missed the personal interactions, but "there is a strong bond among the diplomatic corps and, despite not being able to meet in person, virtual technology continues to bring us together."

She also has missed "attending Mass in a church and receiving the sacraments. However, thanks to technology, we are able to virtually participate in Masses both here in Rome and in Washington, D.C."

"And, of course," she said, she and her husband, Newt, the former speaker of the House of Representatives, "have missed regularly exploring Rome and other parts of Italy. There are so many historic treasures and beautiful places here, and we look forward to getting out again when the time is right."

Fr. Michael Perry, minister general of the Franciscans, said that "while I am certainly connected with my brothers here in fraternity, I miss the completion of the circle: contact with God's people, especially with those who are my teachers — those who are struggling economically, socially, and in other ways, those who are excluded, discounted, discarded."

But, he said, he has heard from friars from around the world who "continue to provide food and other emergency assistance to those who are the poorest of the poor" all while taking precautions to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

As humanity "weathers the current storm," Perry said he hopes people "allow it to teach us, open us to something new that is not yet clear, something on the horizon of meaning that is struggling, as in childbirth, to emerge."

"My prayer," he said, "is that the entire human family will find itself drawn into a greater sense of solidarity and communion and that we also will wake up and recognize the cry of nature that, perhaps, is inviting us to change our thinking, our lifestyle and our relationship with our common home."

Anna Rowlands, professor of Catholic social thought and practice at Durham University in England, said that when she is not traveling for work, "I head to the sea. I live in the cold northeast of England, so I spend more time walking by the water than in it. But that landscape was my healing place. I always knew that landscape mattered to me, but I binge drank my landscape — taking in deep gasps of sea air before heading back to the slog."

Now that travel is impossible, she said, "I have begun the daily ritual of walking and running the lanes and fields within a 5-kilometer radius of my home. I have found fields of butterflies — mysteriously only ever in the same little spot — my partner has taught me to recognize individual birdsong (and) we have watched the trees bud almost by the hour."

"I have come to appreciate slow attentiveness to landscape as part of that call to live well," Rowlands said. "It is an irony that a cruel disease that creates deadly breathlessness forced me to challenge a different kind of engineered breathlessness, one that I barely perceived I lived with."



Callista Gingrich, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, and her husband, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, pose for a photograph in the garden of their Rome residence April, 12, 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/courtesy Ambassador Gingrich)

But, "I am still longing for the sea," she said, and that is where she will head once the lockdown has been lifted.

Elena Testi, a pharmacist and new mother in Rome, said the only thing she would want to keep from the lockdown experience is all the time she and her husband

have been able to spend with 8-month-old Zoe.

While technology has helped maintain connections with family and friends and allowed aunts and uncles to see Zoe grow and start crawling, she said that screens are "the first thing I'm going to eliminate from her life ... at least until she's like 3 years old."

"She's bored, she's actually bored," Testi said. "She's supposed to be exploring now, watching things, going to the park and she's just home in these four walls, and our home is pretty tiny so there's not much she can do."

Testi said working at the pharmacy, one of the few businesses open during lockdown, she is partly a psychologist "because we have to calm people down and reassure them that everything is going to be fine," and that they just need to go home and stay home.

But the police come to the pharmacy each day to make sure the people in line are there for medicine or medical supplies and not hair dye or face cream. People out of their homes without a valid reason risk being fined. "It's really serious right now," she said April 20. "So that kind of increases the fear in people, all these controls."

Patricia Belanger is an elementary school teacher who started a new job in Rome just 10 days before Italy closed all schools; she had just begun getting to know her students before lessons went online.

"It's been quite a challenge, but luckily it's been going really well," she said. Still, she misses the students and doing "activities and games with them or just seeing how they play or how they react (and) noticing what they love doing."

Having only online contact with students has "forced me to rethink my teaching, to be more innovative, to be more creative," she said, and to keep learning "to better myself as a teacher."

Of course, people who already worked from home faced fewer challenges in that aspect of the pandemic's "new normal."

Philippa Hitchen, a longtime Vatican Radio employee now serving as a communications officer for the Lutheran World Federation, has been working from her home in an English village since last summer. But during the pandemic, she said, "I have been very aware of the way people have been checking on me, and on other

friends and colleagues, to try to reduce the sense of isolation that can be very difficult for many people."

"I have been touched by this and have realized that a phone call, email, or even an old-fashioned letter to older friends and relatives can make a big difference and can brighten up people's days in ways we may not imagine," she said. "I've been trying to follow the example of others and think of those in my circle who might appreciate a check-in and I hope to continue doing this, even when lockdown is over."

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