

When We're Exercising Distancing, God is Not

In the current pandemic, distancing ourselves from one another is essential to reducing infection rates and the number of deaths. Such distancing has brought many detriments to the economy, but noteworthy blessings to families. Specifically, the time many people were spending in commuting to work is the time they are now being able to plan ahead, speak with friends and loved ones over the phone, and relax and unwind in downtime. The pace of life is far less demanding now for some. Family members are now enjoying more quality time with one another by virtue of working from home.

The word "economy" comes from the Greek word "*oikonomia*" which means "*household management*" ("*oikos*" = "house" + "*nemein*" = "manage," "distribute," or "allocate"). So much of our energy has been spent in building up the national and world economy to the detriment of where humanity's first sense of economy began; namely: in the family home. So, with this trend now reversing to what it once was on account of the current pandemic (as bad as this disease is), new life is beginning to emerge. Like new green saplings growing from scorched trees after a bushfire, new growth is budding in families. Uncannily, new life often comes from moments of crisis. Interestingly, the same word in Chinese for "crisis" is the same word for "opportunity."

Distancing is our speciality as Catholics. Think about it. The Hebrew word for holiness, "*kodesh*" or "*kiddushin*" literally means, "*set apart*." When something is set apart, it is not just set apart at a *distance*; it is set apart for *consecration*. Consecration is not for being *isolated*; rather, it is for being *united*. In fact, the Hebrew word for "holiness," "*kiddushin*" is the same word used for "*wedding*," or "*marriage*." Why? Because when a man gets married he sets one woman apart from all the other women on earth. She becomes consecrated to him, and he becomes consecrated to her. They become "holy"; his wife is set apart, not to be distanced from her husband, but to be united to him. Although spouses consecrate themselves to one another, their consecration is no mere human act, for as Jesus said, "What therefore *God has joined together*, let not man separate" (Mk 10:9). Being set apart by God also applies for priests and consecrated men and men.

With this understanding, our current period is a moment in time that is consecrated. We are not setting ourselves apart from one another just for the sake of it. We would become very lonely if that were the case! Rather, we are set apart so that we can stop the spread of the pandemic. More importantly, I would like to think that God is setting us apart so that we can be united to Him. God does not cause suffering, but He allows it to happen when He knows that good may come from it.

This understanding helps us to see that if we are going to make good use of this consecrated time, we need to exercise yet another form of distancing. In addition to distancing ourselves

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from others, we do well to distance ourselves from distractions. Allowing ourselves to become distracted by the TV, YouTube, Facebook, and other forms of social media can happen so easily in moments of crisis, for these forms of distractions can be a form of escape or avoidance. Often, these forms of avoidance do not take place consciously, for we have a natural aversion to discomfiting feelings that emerge in moments of crisis. In other words, we often repress such feelings, such that the meanings we ascribe to them end up below the threshold of conscious awareness. Consequently, this response deceptively influences the way we think and relate. In the spiritual life, this form of self-deception is called *resistance*. Resistance is an unconscious interior reaction that is dissonant with God's self-communication. Resistance causes us to know very little about what goes on in our conscious life. Hence, if we are unaware of our experiences of resistance, the strength of our motivation to follow Christ is weakened.

So, in addition to being attentive to the interior movements of the Holy Spirit, being attentive to our experiences of resistance is essential to Christian decision making. To give a few examples, if you have not responded to opportunities to exercise charity for a neighbour due to feeling bored, the boredom is a sign of the presence of resistance. Likewise, if you have refrained from spending time in prayer on account of feeling sad about not being able to do all the things you used to before the current restrictions, then such sadness is another sign of the presence of resistance.

Fundamentally, resistance hinders our faith-response of discipleship, as it renders our prayer less relational by breaking down communication, especially the affective elements of prayer, thus reducing intimacy with God. Rev Dr William A. Barry, SJ and Rev Dr William J. Connolly, SJ (1925-2013), both of whom practiced as psychologists and spiritual directors, explain that people subject to resistance "do not readily express feelings in prayer. They believe them unworthy." They perceive such feelings to be "nonfacts, obstacles to be overcome so that worthy feelings can eventually be placed before God. So, they try to ignore them, try not to notice them. As a result, they have nothing to say to God."¹

Barry and Connolly provide the following insight regarding the consequence of resistance in our relationship with God:

When we look at the quality of our dialogue with God ... the results can be illuminating. Blandness in speaking to God, for instance, can imply a desire to keep the Holy One at an emotional distance ... If we ask ourselves, "What is it that makes me want to be distant just now?" the answer may be: "I want to speak to God, but I don't want to say what I'm feeling," or "I'm afraid of what God will say ... Often

¹ William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 75.

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enough, such dullness and distance occur because important affective attitudes are not being expressed.²

Barry and Connolly provide the following examples to convey how resistance renders prayer to be less relational:

Beneath the confusion and frustration often lurk other reactions even less acceptable to them. Anger at significant people in their lives, resentment toward God, disappointment with themselves, a sense of worthlessness may lie submerged in consciousness. As they are called to speak the truth to God, these feelings may threaten to emerge into awareness. But since such feelings are unacceptable, they do not notice them, and as a result experience confusion. Unaccepted feelings can also come into consciousness obliquely. "I could feel very sad and discouraged about it, but that would be dumb." Because he feels sadness is improper, the person does not let himself notice that he is sad. Instead he reflects on the unreasonableness of being sad. The sadness, then, because it goes at least partly unnoticed, prevents him from listening to and responding to God.³

Conversely, Barry and Connolly explain:

As people become more accustomed to sharing reactions with God, their deeper affective attitudes—their more basic desires, hopes, loves, fears, anger, guilt—begin to emerge into consciousness during prayer. If they can be content to share them rather than attempt to change them or suppress them as they begin to emerge, they find that their sense of relationship with God continues to grow in strength. They will not find God a passive observer of their inner life. The relationship will no longer seem superficial ... When we do [talk to God about how we feel in relation to a topic which is discomforts us] the change from dullness to new interest is often dramatic.⁴

With this understanding, if we are to distance ourselves from distractions during the current crisis so that we can make good use of the extra time for prayer we are blessed with during Lent to prepare for our new life in Christ in Easter, we need to be transparent before God about what is discomforting us. "Self-knowledge is at the root of all religious knowledge,"⁵ as St Cardinal Newman claimed. Whenever I ask people seeking spiritual direction if they have talked to God about their discomforting feelings, a response I frequently receive is: "Oh, but God already knows how I feel." Sadly, when such affective elements are not shared with God, developing a greater knowledge of God's divine nature is hindered, together with a growth in union and intimacy with him. Such growth is hindered because we are not disembodied spirits like the angels; rather, we can only grow in our intimate knowledge of God through contemplating the human nature of his Son. Yet, how can we contemplate Jesus' human nature if we are not familiar with the attractions and resistances we experience in our own human nature?

² *Ibid*, 110-111.

³ *Ibid*, 75.

⁴ *Ibid*, 78, 111.

⁵ John Henry Newman, "Sermon 4: 'Secret Faults'" in *Parochial and Plain Sermons I* (London: Rivington, 1879), 42.

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Accordingly, American Trappist monk, writer, theologian, mystic, poet, social activist, and scholar Thomas Merton, OCSO (1915-1968) asserted: "Unless we discover this deep self, which is hidden with Christ in God, we will never really know ourselves as persons. Nor will we know God. For it is by the doors of this deep self that we enter into the spiritual knowledge of God."⁶

Let us not forget that Jesus suffered much loss during his Passion. In addition to speaking to God about the sadness we feel in response to not being able to do many of the things we used to be able to enjoy before the current restrictions, we have an opportunity to experience identification with Jesus. Have you spoken to Jesus about your sadness in this crisis? Have you considered how your own experience of loss correlates with His own experience of suffering during his Passion?

Significant especially to this topic, St Teresa of Ávila provided the following beautiful words that help us contemplate Christ's Passion and Death in a manner by which helps us to assimilate this Mystery into our lives:

If you are experiencing trials or are sad, behold Him on the way to the garden [of Gethsemane]: what great affliction He bore in His soul; for having become suffering itself, He tells us about it and complains of it. Or behold Him bound to the column, filled with pain, with all His flesh torn in pieces for the great love He bears you; so much suffering, persecuted by some, spit on by others, denied by His friends, abandoned by them, with no one to defend Him, frozen from the cold, left so alone ... or behold Him burdened with the cross, for they didn't even let Him take a breath. He will look at you with those eyes so beautiful and compassionate, filled with tears; He will forget His sorrows so as to console you in yours.⁷

To further assist us to consciously associate ourselves with Christ's Passion, St Teresa also said: "Not only will you desire to look at Him but you will also delight in speaking with Him, not with ready-made prayers but with those that come from the sorrow of your own heart, for He esteems them highly."⁸ St Teresa told the sisters within her Carmelite Religious Order that if they considered that it would be easier to contemplate Christ's crucifixion in real life than through prayer, "Don't believe it. Whoever doesn't want to use a little effort now to recollect ... and look at this Lord ... would have been much less able to stay at the foot of the cross with the Magdalene, who saw His death with her own eyes."⁹

Since we know how significant Christ's Life, Death, and Resurrection is for us in our lives, let us be sure to contemplate what Christ has done for us during this great time of grace.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (London: Burns & Oats, 1962), 30.

⁷ *The Way of Perfection in The Collected Works of St Teresa of Ávila* (Vol. 2), trans. Kieren Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1980), Ch. 26, No 5.

⁸ *Ibid*, Ch, 26, No 6.

⁹ *Ibid*, Ch, 26, No 8.