Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Spirituality



Sr. Laura Hammel gardening this year in the yard of the Sisters of St. Clare convent in Saginaw, Michigan (Provided photo)



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This new year brought a change in our lives that none us expected nor could have anticipated. The 2019 novel coronavirus pandemic has been an unseen threat for several months. Even the terms used to describe it are extreme: "unprecedented time," "devastating impact." This pandemic, like 9/11, is seared into our corporate memory.

For me, the strangeness of not visually seeing the danger is most unsettling. The usual warning signs of impending danger are not there. If this had been a physical invasion or a natural disaster, there would have been warning sirens. Instead, we heard how the virus was affecting people in China, but I did not think it would come here! Surely, we have better health management in our developed country. This assumption proved to be one of my many mistaken biases.

One day everything went quiet, except for the news reporters. Their voices were the sirens. However, my neighborhood seemed unusually quiet. The road outside our house that leads to three schools was quiet.

During this halt to all activity, our contemplative life was altered and stilled as well. The phone fell silent … even the robocalls stopped. Visitors no longer dropped by, and the amount of mail declined. However, emails asking for help increased. People sought prayers for family, health and finances.

Although the outside world became quiet, my inner world was not. I found that I had deep anxiety about this world pandemic. I watched as the number of deaths went up in the world and especially in my own state and those where friends live. I watched the stock market numbers to see where the "confidence level" was in our country, and I waited for the infection curve to flatten.

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It was clear to me that this infection crisis had tested my inner quiet and in a way, my faith. Not my faith in God, but rather, my faith in God's methods. Why so many deaths, especially among the weak, the vulnerable, and now, the children? As the virus impinges on our lives, I feel anger because we can't control it. I can't see friends who are dying from COVID-19 complications.

Easter came, and I hardly noticed it. I missed Holy Week and all the symbols and rituals for energy and life. I resonated with the homilies about the empty tomb, but not for reasons the preacher gave. I felt left with the empty tomb and no visit from the Gardener telling me all was well, "He is risen."

After getting through that crisis of Easter and video streaming liturgies, I knew that I had to find something to comfort me and help me to see my faith from a new perspective.

In my collection of things "to do someday," I found a set of DVDs, "Evolution and Christogenesis" by Ilia Delio, a Franciscan sister and scientist. As I worked my way through the series, I felt my spirit challenged. Delio led me to see that our world and universe is in constant change. This change is all around us. We see it in all the activities of nature, particularly now as the pandemic travels throughout the world.

I began to see that my challenge is to see through my anxieties and to trust in God's ways and methods. One of the basic themes of Scripture is to see the world in new ways, "See I make all things new!" (Revelation 21.5); “See, I am doing a new thing!” (Isaiah 43:19); “See, I will create new heavens and a new earth” (Isaiah 65.17). One thing that I do see now is that what is happening in a place far away like China, does and will affect me. We are all very connected.

This is not a new idea for me, however, Delio's thoughts came to me at this particular historical moment in life as I am coping with the pandemic. My awareness of the power of nature, seen, and unseen, has deepened. To see that God is in all of this has helped me to enfold faith into my anxiety and soften the fear that I felt.



Sr. Laura, standing, center, and her Poor Clare community enjoying the beauties of spring in their back yard (Provided photo)

Seeing the world as Delio and many of our Scriptures point out has given me a stronger sense of meaning and faith that I didn't have before. Previously I would read about pandemics in other countries, but they seemed a crisis far from me. Now I must face a crisis that touches me directly.

The virus epidemic has forced me to slow down. I am grateful for the time to see the world and my faith in a new way. Fortunately, spring came again and the cold winds settle down. I got to attend to yard cleaning and fertilizing the garden. It was again time for me to put up bird houses and feeders. It drew me back to the — seen and unseen — powers among us.

I see others, like myself who "wanted out" to walk the paths, to feel the sun and to breathe the air. We left our tombs of "self-isolating" to experience the power of the life all around us, while being careful to stay masked when necessary and to respect social distancing so as not to endanger others during this time.

We are well over half way through this unprecedented year. This virus has halted our usual activity and helped me to notice the "seen and unseen" gifts and challenges present with us. Among these gifts is the messenger in the garden of our lives saying, "I am risen." These words open my eyes to see the palpable activity of God present in our world, the divine activity that can absorb many of our anxieties and fears and bring us comfort.

[Laura Hammel is a member of the Sisters of St. Clare, a Poor Clare community in Saginaw, Michigan. In addition to the prayer ministry in her diocese, she has developed and maintained a website introducing different prayer forms useful at certain times of the year. These include an Advent calendar, contemplation using Stations of the Cross, a Pentecost Novena and Mysteries of the Rosary.]