Community News
Religious Life



Passionist Sister Mary Grace of Pittsburgh makes altar bread in this undated photo. (CNS photo/courtesy Passionist Nuns of Pittsburgh)

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When it comes to social distancing, cloistered religious communities are way ahead of everyone.

For thousands of years, secluded religious orders have been devoted to prayer and work, ordinarily in silence. The physical separation that is part of a cloistered life is a central aspect of their sacrifice for the greater good.

Passionist nuns founded, with the help of Passionist fathers, their first American monastery in Pittsburgh in 1910. The nuns then formed the first retreat house for women in the region that includes Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia.

Three members of the Passionist nuns in Pittsburgh recently spoke about their lives amid the pain and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sr. Mary Grace, who trained in her earlier life as a pharmacist and has been a Passionist for 15 years, said it's understandable that many people are having difficulty coping during the pandemic.

"God made us in his own image, and God is Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in relationship," she said in an interview for Catholic News Service. "Human beings are made for relationship. That's who we are. And so, to have that dimension cut off is a very painful and difficult thing."

A report released Aug. 14 in the Centers for Disease Control's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report found significantly heightened levels of mental health concerns, substance use and suicidal thoughts among young adults, racial and ethnic minorities, essential workers and unpaid adult caregivers. The study links those adverse conditions to anxiety and isolation associated with the pandemic.

Those feelings of loneliness and despair are similar to when one member of a longtime happily married couples dies, said Sr. Mary Ann, who grew up in Pittsburgh and has been a Passionist nun for 60 years. The surviving spouse, though

brokenhearted, must try to find meaning in his or her suffering.

"Certainly with the pandemic, with death and even with aging, with illness, there's an increasing loneliness that I think needs to be turned into solitude," she said. "And I don't mean solitude as a negative term, but solitude in becoming at home within our own heart. Solitude in terms of finding God there."

Sr. Mary Ann recalled a retreat talk in which a priest spoke about the Baltimore Catechism, asking the question "Why did God make me?" In the answer — "God made me to know him, to love him and to serve him" — she said, young children were given the meaning of life.

"It takes a whole lifetime to reflect on what that means, and it keeps us focused," she said. "Am I just trying to climb the ladder? Why am I trying to do this? What's all this frenzy of activity about? I just found that it was a very profound thing."

The lack of peace and quiet and prevalence of frenetic movement in society, especially during a time of physical and emotional isolation, make it hard for people to center their lives around God, the nuns said. And whenever there is great difficulty, hope can be fleeting.

"Only God can satisfy the human heart. No matter how much we long for closeness or intimacy, at rock bottom only God can satisfy that," Sr. Mary Ann told CNS.

One dilemma that many people, especially the young, encounter are feelings of isolation despite being hyper-connected with smartphones and the internet. Being connected through modern technology doesn't make them truly present to others, the nuns said.

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Even though the Passionists — who occupy a five-acre compound in the city's busy Carrick neighborhood -– are a cloistered community, they are anything but isolated. They watch very little television but get information about what's occurring in the world from newspapers and people who contact them for prayers in person, through email or by telephone.

"You cannot be cut off from the world to the point that you don't know what's happening," said Mother Joyce, superior of the nuns, who has been in Pittsburgh 30 years. "It's important that you know what's happening because that's what you're here for, to pray for salvation and for the people of the world, so you have to know."

It also helps that they belong to an international congregation of men and women religious. There are Passionists in many countries and other areas of the United States. They all share their activities and concerns regarding global situations.

As contemplatives, the Passionist nuns witness to the primacy of God. Their charism is to lead lives fixed on eucharistic adoration and intercession for the needs of the world, while keeping alive the memory of God's infinite love for all in the passion and death of Jesus.

"St. Paul of the Cross, our founder, experienced that love, and he found it so overwhelming that he wanted everyone to know how much they were loved," Sr. Mary Ann said.

The saint urged Passionists to have rooms set apart for people to experience God's love. Thus, the nuns have a retreat house where women can join them for days of solitude and prayer.

However, the pandemic forced the nuns to close the retreat house and cancel public Masses until further notice. But the public chapel is open daily for private prayer and on Fridays for exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Moreover, they have limited their vocation retreats and curtailed their main work, which is making altar breads.

"The altar bread work stopped for several months," Sr. Mary Ann said. "It has given us more time for prayer, and also to get more time to work outside in the fresh air."

The nuns follow a monastic schedule of prayer and work. Coinciding with the Liturgy of the Hours, each day begins with morning prayer at 5:45 a.m. through night prayer at 8:30 p.m. Every Wednesday is a day of study, and Fridays are focused on eucharistic adoration.

Mother Joyce said the sisters are blessed to have Passionist priests from St. Paul of the Cross Monastery on Pittsburgh's South Side celebrate Mass daily for them.

"You can see that there is a rhythm of prayer, work and community," Sr. Mary Grace said.

The nuns are regularly asked to pray for their neighbors and friends. They can be contacted through their website at http://www.passionistnunspgh.org.

Each Passionist community has its own particular spirit. The Pittsburgh spirit is rooted in the five foundresses who came to America from Italy and settled in an old farmhouse on the current property.

"They left their parents, they left the monastery where they had expected to live forever, they left their country, never to see it again," Sr. Mary Ann said. They came to America to make it known that "God is so good." Today, the nuns consider it their joy to continue that legacy.

The Passionists rely on divine providence for their community's continued survival, which is itself a witness to God's love.

Sr. Mary Ann, the resident historian, said three weeks after the sisters began living in Pittsburgh, "the nuns wrote back to the motherhouse in Italy and said, ‘There is hardly a day goes by that these good American people do not do something to help us.'"

"Somehow, God always comes through," Mother Joyce said. "Divine providence works."