



SEMINARY LIFE AMIDST COVID-19

“In the past two weeks, the number of cases of COVID-19 outside China has increased 13-fold, and the number of affected countries has tripled...[The World Health Organisation, WHO] has been assessing this outbreak around the clock and we are deeply concerned...We have therefore made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic.” With those words by WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, life, as we knew it, rapidly began to change.

At first, the changes were hard to believe. Many scoffed at the implications of the new buzzword “social distancing”. Now, however, not so much. The word has become as common as the morning takeaway coffee once was for many commuters, in (now empty) trains, office blocks and city streets.

Nestled among the terrace houses of Carlton and just a street away from the usually bustling Lygon Street, the Seminary too has witnessed our little corner of the world change dramatically. Over the space of a mere week, I recall seeing busy Rathdowne Street change from being a car park during peak-hour traffic, to an empty road.

Then came the announcement that all academic classes were to be suspended and in short order, many of us returned home to families, parishes and dioceses, before borders closed and heavier restrictions on travel were enforced. In a few days, the Seminary decreased to about a dozen in lockdown with staff. After some time, I too left the now deserted corridors and emptier chapel.

“In an attempt to find a quick way to describe all these changes I have taken to calling this time ‘The Great Disruption’ because it is a disruption,” writes Fr Denis Stanley, Seminary Rector, to me in an email. It is “a break in the way we take many things in life for granted”. In a letter sent to parents and friends of the college soon after the lockdowns began, Fr Denis wrote; “formation for priesthood, however, has not ended. In this time of emergency, it must continue in other ways putting our creativity, resilience and faith to the test.”

While Good Shepherd Sunday usually brings us to parishes, this year, the Vocations Office organised for our vocational witness to be online instead, a few of us recording videos through our phones, which were then shared on Facebook. It was an initiative that garnered record numbers in social media engagement for the page. Soon to be ordained Deacon, Jaycee Napoles, teamed up with Assistant Vocation’s Director Fr Nick Pearce sharing his top tips for discerning a vocation to the Priesthood through these trying times.



Very Rev Denis Stanley EV (second from right) with seminary staff

Very Rev Dr Kevin Lenehan is the newly elected Master of Catholic Theological College (CTC) where we seminarians undertake the academic portion of our studies. Having only begun the role in September last year, in the space of few very short weeks, he has led the college through dramatic changes. “In February 2020, the CTC staff were discussing the possibility of taking one or two of our courses online as a way to better serve people in parishes, schools and other ministries around the dioceses of Victoria and Tasmania,” he wrote in response to an email I had sent him.

“By the end of March 2020, our entire timetable of courses and units had been transferred to online delivery! This has been a major challenge for staff and students, perhaps the biggest change CTC has undertaken in its 50-year history.”

“For lecturers, it has meant learning to use the technology, and to re-design learning materials to suit the online environment. It has also meant learning to work from home, some with family and children sharing their new workspace, others with parish communities or religious houses to negotiate within a new way of gathering (or not) as church.”



Very Rev Kevin Lenehan

“For our seminarian students there have been a range of challenges: relocating to shelter at home arrangements, finding access to devices and internet; finding new means to keep progressing with formation and pastoral goals, as well as balancing their academic tasks and finding the resources to complete assessment tasks.”

“For other students, many of them adult professionals balancing household, work and study, often caring for younger and older family members, the daily routine has been turned upside down, and they are just hoping they can 'hold it all together' until things start to return to 'normal'”.

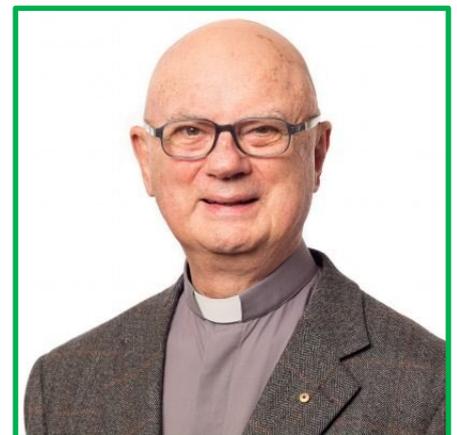
Perhaps somewhat wistfully, he notes, “we are missing the regular informal contact with colleagues in the corridors and common rooms at CTC, as well as the pleasure of the classroom with interaction with students and their learning.”

While everything seems so uncertain, it is possible that the legacy of this pandemic may be the further transformation of the way we keep in touch and communicate. Another word we have added to our everyday vocab is “Zoom”...as a noun, not the verb we come across in commercials for Mazda or children’s books about cars and rockets.

Fr Kevin is not alone when he observed; “We are finding that Zoom teaching is physically and mentally exhausting, and are trying extra hard to keep in contact with class members and make sure they have all the resources they need.”

Indeed! The prospect of sitting in front of your screen for three hours, listening to a lecturer is not something too many relish. One student found it “quite difficult getting used to online lectures”, a sentiment shared by many students. However, Zoom is not without its supporters. “I am actually enjoying Zoom. It enables one to have a very conversational approach to teaching. A lecture room tends to alter that somewhat” writes Rev Prof Austin Cooper OMI in an email. Once the Master of CTC himself, his academic life continues as a much-loved and respected lecturer and mentor to graduate students, as well as spiritual director to some of us. “I am able to work from home giving lectures on Zoom and speaking by phone to people with whom I am in contact.”

Fr Austin (pictured right) is my own Spiritual Director and with our correspondence now through email and phone calls, it is just another way seminary formation has changed in recent weeks. Speaking over the phone, one afternoon, I asked him how he’s going and chuckling he said, “I am doing well, though this is a very strange world in many ways: one has an attitude of caution (say in boarding a tram), that one would not usually experience.” He went on to recount humorously a trip to the post office, noting how it was as if everyone feared the other was carrying some kind bomb that could go off at any moment! “Of course, I am NOT given to carrying bombs on trams or anywhere else: one has some standards!” We both laughed. But deep down I wished it was over another hot cup of tea with him, surrounded by the many books which appear to hold the roof up in his office. Then came his practical, yet also seemingly winsome, advice for living through this time, “I have a programme for each day, clear yet always remaining flexible. I make sure to spend some time outdoors either walking, gardening or just admiring nature: this is always an element of my prayer anyway.”



For Catholics in general and in particular for us Seminarians (given the regular timetable of prayer which usually structures our days), the biggest change has perhaps been felt in our prayer lives. Personally, I took for granted the

entire chapel filled with our voices, the organ resounding and that rhythmic unison, back and forth, between us as we chanted the office together. Then, off course, there is the absence of the Mass and indeed all the sacraments.

Well, sort off. 'Online Mass' is yet another buzzword Catholics have recently added to their everyday vocab. We have all been "thrust into the digital world" says Fr Denis, "encouraged to watch parish liturgy live streamed. It might be innovative and the best we can do during 'The Great Disruption'...however, it is stubbornly strange to watch," he notes. "Watching traditionally crowded events online by yourself – like the Holy Week liturgies – look and feel very different."

"There has been a lot of online theological reflection and debate provoked about live streaming worship and the implications for traditional sacramental theology...I have found all this fresh, fascinating and thought-provoking." As an example, he sends me an extract from a critique on the limits of live-streamed celebrations of the Eucharist that points out:

Because of their institution during his lifetime, there is an unbreakable line between the 'stuff-and-gestures' nature of sacraments and the earthly life of Jesus...the sacraments involve sensory engagement. The 'stuff-and-gestures' of the sacraments must, therefore, embody openness to the senses...offered as a physical reality that engages the senses of all those who are participating...The way that Christ chooses to impart grace is through sacraments that involve physical stuff, action and presence. It therefore appears out of keeping with not only tradition but their nature to attempt to divorce sacraments from their physical source.

"One of the things that I hope the pandemic will also leave behind for us," writes Fr Denis in an email, "is a yet greater love and understanding of the 'physical stuff, action and presence' of our worship, especially the Eucharist. To love as people who pray...and understand better the presence of each of us at the Eucharist – how we need each other's presence." He writes, "We are privileged to follow and be one with the actions of Jesus; to bless and to break, to pour, to eat and drink."



Bill Lowry, a fifth-year seminarian for the Diocese of Ballarat, is similarly spiritually astute. "I have during this time tried to meditate regularly on the words of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans; 'All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose' (Rom 8:28)."

Anecdotally, says Bill, "I have been greatly heartened by the introspective turn of many people, evaluating what is truly meaningful in life." Despite all the uncertainty and difficulties of our present moment, he believes that God, in some way, can bring about our good. "It may not be comprehensible to us now, but I certainly feel that the Lord is working almost imperceptibly in our hearts...to facilitate a more ardent love and desire for him."

In conclusion one of the Prayers of the Faithful prayed at Mass in the Seminary read..."that this time of crisis will soon pass and leave behind it a world richer in mercy, brighter with care for the vulnerable and more thankful for those who gladly give their lives to serve others."

Samuel Pearson

This is an edited extract of an article which can be read in full on the seminary news: www.corpuschristicollege.org.au