



Whilst the media promotes the benefits of physical exercises and often recommends distracting activities, it has been noticeably silent when it comes to the matter of spiritual exercises. Yet, as we know, our inner life (to a great extent) determines how we live and it's easy to discover this virus has entered the heart, if not the body, where it can wreak havoc.

Unfortunately lock-down has meant I can give more attention to television/media – secular ‘contemplation’ – but it offers little apart from a diet of ‘fun-filled’ distractions: what might St. Clare, say! 24-hour TV news can become addictive and its regular reference to the pandemic can increase a sense of desolation where faith in the goodness of God is overwhelmed by focusing on the terrible effects of the virus. Constantly changing information about what we must/should do can prevent listening more deeply to awareness of how to respond. So, I’ve limited my viewing and sought to increase my thankfulness for life recalling my need for deep joy: ‘(Brothers and sisters) will carry with them an inner secret of happiness and peace which all will feel, if they may not know its source (*First Order Principles*, Day 28, Society of St. Francis - SSF).’

Yet loneliness, fear, and worry about matters over which we have little control have a desolating effect. I’ve found help in reflections by Mary Clare SLG and Roland Walls (Fairacres Publications: *Loneliness to Solitude* and *Aloneness not Loneliness*) realising how important it is not to view loneliness as an enemy but a place of potential encounter. So, along with any fears and anxieties I may have, loneliness needs holding in the presence of God for the Spirit to work with them. Being present to the Presence in every moment isn’t easy but to attentively live in each moment guards against desolation getting the upper hand. It can also help prevent contemplative practices becoming a means of escape rather than surrender and *metanoia*, that change of heart Christ comes to enable.

Lockdown has enabled me to pray the four-fold (SSF) Divine Office where psalms, prayed contemplatively, are enriching and lead to a more profound need to surrender my-self to the Divine Will. Extended times of prayer (especially in the early morning) enable an opening of the heart to a deeper solitude with our Creative Lover whilst the Jesus Prayer, in various forms, has been important both as a type of ‘Centring Prayer’ and intercession. Such prayer, heartfully offered, provides a means of becoming still, calm and recollected, encouraging me to open the prayer to others:

Jesus Christ (*breathe in*), Son of God,
have mercy (*breathe out*) on (me a sinner / Mary/them/Peter ...)

Rather than becoming victim to fear of the outside world, contemplative walks have helped if, with thankfulness, I open my heart to God and engage my senses to encounter the Divine: contemplative awareness of trees through sight, sound and touch has been especially beneficial.

John-Francis Friendship
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