



# PURSUING THE CHRISTIAN IDEAL UNDER LOCKDOWN

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Published by Splendour Project  
[www.splendourproject.com](http://www.splendourproject.com)

For internal circulation only

# PREAMBLE

This booklet is directed at the lay faithful of the Holy Catholic Church in many countries that are currently experiencing an enforced lockdown by their civil authorities for good reason, that is, the uncontrollable spread of the Coronavirus pandemic. While it is hoped that this lockdown will eventually ease the spread of the dreaded virus, many of our lay faithful are bewildered at the manner in which their familiar ways of life have been abruptly altered, disrupted, by this unfortunate phenomenon.

Further compounding the pain and fear of loss is the fact that in many localities they are not even permitted to assemble in the various parish churches that they so love in order to celebrate the Holy Sacraments, this too with sound reason. It is considered a great act of charity for our neighbour when we sacrifice that which is excellently good in a spirit of protecting others from further harm than has already befallen our societies. And yet, this act of charity does not necessarily bring sentiments of joy and

hope for those who have spent at least the larger portion of their lifetimes feeding on and being devoted to the Sacraments of the Church.

On this note, the lay faithful are properly instructed to obey the pastoral and liturgical directives of their Bishops. The decisions that they have made in the light of the current predicament could only have been undertaken with much prayer and suffering with those for whom they are made. We must stand together with our Shepherds as a source of collaborative strength for them as much as they have been sacrificial pillars of strength for the faithful of the Church, for this too is an act of charity.

At the same time, this booklet seeks to console in a constructive way those who suffer the pain of being distanced from the sacramental life. In this booklet, I propose how we can fruitfully live our lives in the confines of our own homes throughout this season, guided by the wisdom of our Sacred Tradition in the form of the monastic life.

The monastic life continues to be lived today in a steadfast way by monastic communities all around the world. In my humble assessment, the current circumstances remind us that there are no better people by whom we can be inspired and guided on how we can best conduct our lives in ways that will draw us closer to the heart of the Kingdom of God.

Of course, my intention is not to propose that we all retreat into cloistered lives in the same manner that the monks have done. What ensues from this discussion is a proposition on how their daily spiritual disciplines can inform us of how we can – or must – conduct our lives in the current “cloisters” of our homes at a time like this.

It is my prayer that you will find hope in this booklet. As you read it, know that my heart is close to yours and that my daily prayers are continuously being offered for those of you who feel that the weight of the cross is just a little more than you think you are able to bear.

# LIVING IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

A large part of human civilisation currently finds itself under a major lockdown. Thus far, the civil authorities have examined the impact of this lockdown from the political, economic, social, and educational perspectives. In turn, it is now perhaps a good time for the People of God to consider what this lockdown might mean for us spiritually, particularly, from the perspective of how we as Catholics ought to conduct our lives throughout this long-drawn season.

This lockdown has caused much unease within many of us, not just because of the resulting inconveniences of obtaining daily provisions or undertaking our professional work or managing our personal finances. In large part, the restriction of our daily movements beyond our abodes has enforced a non-voluntary silence upon us. It is a silence of physical movement, distancing, and isolation. For a society that is thoroughly addicted to noise and busyness, this prospect (which has now very much become a daily reality for us) is frightening. Throughout the many years of

our lives, we have made it a point to avoid various realities about ourselves that we refused to be confronted with. We have done this by keeping ourselves distracted by the noises and interruptions of the world, and it distresses many people that these very distractions are now forcefully removed from us.

Many of us therefore find ourselves lost in this ocean of silence. We have little idea of how to move forward or how to live meaningfully. A cursory viewing of social media today reveals how many people are killing their boredom through various creative means by indulging in their passions within the permissible confines of their homes. This is not necessarily wrong. But in these circumstances, surely the fact that we are Catholics must mean something more. We are obliged to ask ourselves if there might not perhaps be a more excellent manner of settling into this new way of life, especially given the fact that we have to now be involuntarily deprived of the Holy Sacraments constantly administered by Holy Mother Church all throughout our lives and which we have frequently (even if unknowingly) taken for granted.



How then should we live excellent Christian lives under this lockdown? I propose that we return to the wisdom of the Church Fathers who, for the sake of heaven, voluntarily placed themselves under perpetual lockdown: the ancient monks, who, by the way, still exist to this day. In particular, I wish to expound the counsel of the monks who lived under the guidance of Saint Benedict by realising the Benedictine ideal of conducting their monastic lives through the disciplines of **prayer, work, and study**.

For the monks, isolating themselves from secular life did not mean just doing nothing and getting fat on edible feedings provided by the monastery. They sought to maintain a balance of life through these three components that they each undertook every day, and in so doing, bringing themselves into a deeper experience of God at work in their consciousness and their daily realities.

Of course, our goal here is not to become monks, for these brethren were indeed called to a particular way of life. But yet, their disciplines are equally meant for the wellbeing of every woman and man, even those of us existing in the modern world, albeit with varying applications.

## THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

As Catholics, many of us have grown accustomed to “saying prayers”, that is, reciting a series of words that we feel obligated to say in a spirit of being good children of the Church. In the busyness of life, few people truly have the discipline to listen to the words that they are reciting themselves. Prayer has become in large part a mechanical action. Over time, many have even stopped actively praying.

Our physical isolation from the outside world now gives us a window of grace to retreat into our closets of prayer. In fact, a lockdown of more than two weeks presents a

very good opportunity for a real retreat. We now not only have time to recite prayers but also to truly embrace a posture of contemplative prayer by listening to what we say in our prayers and pondering upon the meaning of that which we say.

Even if we are unable to participate daily in the Holy Mass, it is an excellent time for us to unite ourselves to the sacrifice that is offered at the altar by the priests on our behalf; this is undoubtedly the most excellent act of prayer. And since we cannot hear the words prayed by the priest (unless we watch the Mass online), it is a wonderful opportunity to read through the prayers of the Mass that are said so regularly by the priests that we miss out on their meaning and significance because they have been so taken for granted. Familiarity has not necessarily worked to our advantage; many times, it has dulled our senses to the significance of these holy actions.

Besides celebrating the daily Masses, the ancient monks structured their time each day by pausing after a certain block of hours to spend time in prayer. The demarcation

of each chunk of time is punctuated by a fixed time to pray and contemplate on the mysteries of God. These moments of punctuation were called canonical hours. From this practice emerged the hours of Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline.

A good suggestion for us as homebound Christians would be to begin our day early, at around 6 AM, with the Angelus in order to contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation, followed by praying the Lauds. From there, you may go about your daily obligations at home before pausing again at noon, just before lunch, to pray the Angelus once more. At 3 PM, it would be an admirable practice to take some time to meditate on a devotional prayer such as the Rosary or the Divine Mercy Chaplet (of course, this could also be done in the night). At 6 PM, meditate on the Angelus once again followed by Vespers.

All throughout the day, as you also focus on your other obligations, it is worthwhile repeating the Jesus Prayer that was taught to us by the ancient Eastern monks who were called hesychasts: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,

have mercy on me a sinner". This is in keeping with the counsel of Saint Paul to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). A deep and constant contemplation on this prayer serves to orientate us towards the holiness of God, and this exercise serves to bring us to a state of increasing humility as we recognise our unworthiness and sinfulness in the face of the Holy God.

Even for those of us who are already familiar with these spiritual exercises, if all these prayers have been recited with much haste all along, it is now a good time to allow for prayer to become a language of the heart. Let this season be a window of grace for us to move from habitually "reciting prayers" to an exercise of making prayer our very vocation in life, to journey from duty fulfilment to spiritual excellence. After all, the thing that the world needs most right now (even more than a lockdown or a quarantine) is prayer.

# THE DISCIPLINE OF WORK

Work is intrinsic to human nature. When God created humankind, part of the mandate given was to exercise dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:26-28). This mandate to provide pastoral care over the earth essentially gives meaning and definition to the work of man. Being under lockdown does not negate the vocation of humanity to work.

Even the monks themselves, being in perpetual lockdown, were given to specific forms of work which naturally became means of sustenance for their monastic communities. One ancient form of work they frequently engaged in, a historical fact which continues to fascinate the modern man, was the production of alcohol beverages! You may have heard of the Trappist monasteries brewing their famous Trappist beer or the Carthusian monks brewing their top-notch Chartreuse liqueur. These two examples are certainly just a couple among many others, but let us leave this topic as a matter for a different discussion lest we digress. Further

exemplary activities constituting the work of the monks in their cloisters are cooking, planting, building, repairing, painting, and writing, among many others.

For those who imagine that these ancient monks (and modern ones as well) live easy lives under the financial charity of the Church institution, nothing could be farther from the truth. These are men who “live by the work of their hands” (Rule of Saint Benedict 48), and based on the Rule given to them, this is part of that which makes them “truly monks”. By the end of each day, one can be certain that the monk would be physically and mentally quite tired out from the amount of activity he has undertaken.

This component of the monastic life, whereby a monk is to spend several allocated hours a day devoting himself to manual labour, most certainly gives us a guideline for life under lockdown. Within the confines of our own “monasteries”, we are not to be idle. Like the monks, we must be actively working.

To be sure, many of you would be expected by your employers to keep busy with the professional work of your corporations and institutions in order to keep the operations going from the confines of your residential premises. If this is your job that requires a certain number of hours from you, then it has to be undertaken with a deep sense of integrity and professionalism.

It is natural that many employers and superiors of your corporations would be feeling rather uneasy or insecure at this unprecedented time because they are unable to closely scrutinise your work ethic. It would be good counsel for you to report the progress of your work at regular intervals to your superiors, better still before they pursue you for these regular updates. Reporting even before you are pressed to do so would assure your superiors that you are reliable and vigilant in discharging your duties even without being under watchful eye.

But the mandate to work extends even to those who are "fortunate" enough to not have to be working professionally at home. Continuing to tend to the needs



of your family, especially by preparing meals, is an unspeakably holy task to be undertaking. In progressive societies, the abundance of readily prepared food is constantly taken for granted, and the availability of homecooked food is a luxury that time often cannot afford. In these times of home confinement, the simple act of preparing food for one's family is a selfless act of loving and giving to those in our homes.

We would also do well to not forget the need to have clean homes. Many modern homes are dependent on professional cleaners – if not live-in domestic helpers – who come at regular intervals to clean up our otherwise dusty (and often messy) homes. Since such professional services cannot be rendered during this season, part of our work must be to clean and keep our homes tidy. This too is an act of love for our families and communities that share our common space. We are spending an unprecedented amount of time in our homes now, and providing our families with clean, tidy and cosy homes is nothing short of being a spiritual act of self-giving.

Do not forget also if you have elderly or less able neighbours and relatives who may be in need of assistance in terms of their daily meals and home maintenance. There is no better time, and no better way, to love them throughout this season than to be mindful of the basic needs of those around us. Because we are confined to our homes, it is also easier than ever to turn a blind eye to these realities. The love of God must propel us to step beyond our self-preserving instincts to also sustain our neighbours with this Godly love.

One danger to avoid when working at home or from home is that of overworking. This would be a particular pitfall for those who have a gravitation towards getting overindulgent in work. When work gets in the way of prayer, of our study and learning, and of our relationships with people around us, it becomes a destructive activity.

One other matter of consequence pertaining to this component of work is working our bodies, i.e. keeping ourselves physically fit. Even the Choirmonks (of the Carthusians) who live in seclusion leave their cloisters

once a week to participate in long community walks of three to four hours in the countryside in order to keep themselves healthy. While our current context may not permit for us to leave our doorsteps for physical exercises, it certainly should not deter us from finding creative ways to move our bodies so as to expel our excess energies.

The Carthusian monks have an interesting way of conducting their weekly community walk. Throughout these walks, they would each walk with a partner with whom they would speak on lighthearted matters as they make that journey. Every half an hour or so, they would change partners. By the end of the walk, a monk would have walked and spoken with about eight of his brothers. The occasion of physical exercise becomes also an opportune time of fellowship among brothers. We could certainly be agents of inspiration for our communities and family members to undertake our exercises together as a way of strengthening our visible sense of communion with one another.

## THE DISCIPLINE OF STUDY

The monastic method of studying very much pertained to the way the monks studied Sacred Scripture as part of their daily practice. They did not invent this particular method of study; rather, it was inherited from the Early Christians, who in turn inherited it as an ancient Jewish tradition. This method came to be known as the Divine Reading (of Scripture) or the *Lectio Divina*.

Until this day, we are highly encouraged to cultivate this method of contemplating Scripture. Many people today, because of being so unfamiliar with Scripture, see the Divine Reading as a technical and specialised exercise that is undertaken only by the religious and clergy. Essentially, the Divine Reading requires our devotion towards the Word of God. It requires a disposition of handling the Word of God in the same manner as we would when reading a letter written by someone that we love so deeply, which would cause us to intensely contemplate on every single word contained in it, even every punctuation! When handling the Word of God in

this manner, rather than scrutinising the contents of Scripture as an arbiter, we allow ourselves to be drawn into the message contained in it and to ponder on its contents in our hearts.

When we undertake this daily exercise, we will find that it takes us through a movement of the heart. This movement is a journey that begins with the *Lectio*, that is, listening attentively and intently to the Words of Scripture that we read. This listening involves the heart and not just the ears. This can be done only when we are calm and silent in our hearts. It requires us to intentionally avoid distractions and noise.

The next step of this movement is *Meditatio*, which involves internalising the message that we are contemplating from the Word of God. In modern terms, we could say, that it involves personalising what God might be saying to you directly through these words. In other words, what you read from Scripture cannot remain a mere idea in your mind that does not move your life at all. The Word of God is life-changing, and for as long as it

has not impacted your life in any way, you have not yet truly received it in a personal manner. No one can receive the Word of God and remain unaffected by what it demands of us.

From *Meditatio*, you then move on to *Oratio*. At this juncture, you speak to God in an affective way about how His Holy Word has moved you. You may even express to Him your emotions and feelings about this experience. When the Word of God touches you, it may bring sentiments of comfort, consolation, contrition, happiness, or sometimes even fear or anger. These feelings are your most honest communication with God.

Finally, you arrive at the *Contemplatio*, which is a moment of allowing yourself to experience the love of God. Whatever it is you have felt at the *Oratio*, you run interiorly into the loving arms of God knowing that He loves you unceasingly and wants only that which is good for you. You conclude that He is present with you and wants you to make Him the sole subject of your desire in everything that you do with your life.

This daily journey of the *Lectio Divina* is an ancient practice propagated by the earliest Christians and then the monks, which continues to apply to the faithful today. While we may have been incredibly busy in our hearts to the extent that we are seldom listening even to the Scripture Readings during the Eucharistic celebrations, we are now presented with the prospect of entering into the heart of Sacred Scripture. This need not necessarily just be the reading of Scripture, as the monks have also done the same with various spiritual writings from the ancient Church Fathers.

Today, we are presented with a plethora of resources from the Church by way of the internet. It is impossible to run short of resources for spiritual reading. If we have never had the time to devote ourselves to these resources, there is no better time than now.

In the contemporary world, it is also important for us to be competent in matters of humanity and society. The balanced life propagated by Saint Benedict requires that

we not be too “heavenly” to be of any earthly use. We must be both spiritual and also wise in our worldly conduct in order that we may be helpful in the Church’s endeavour to direct the affairs of this world towards the Kingdom of God. This is especially true for the lay faithful (and even for secular clergy) who live our lives in secular society.

To that end, the discipline of studying also suggests that it would be beneficial for us to dedicate time to developing our competence in fields in which we are either already involved or intend to be involved in time to come. Your field of work may pertain to the world economy, or politics, or public administration, or accounting and finance. The discipline of study dictates that we should be on a never-ending discipline of becoming increasingly competent in our understanding of the various fields of our professions. This too is a matter of study that is entirely relevant to the mission of the Church in the world.



The aftereffect of the current pandemic is bound to be serious. Many people will be needing guidance on how to conduct their lives in accordance with the new state of world affairs. People will be losing their jobs, and many will find their disposable income drastically reduced to the point of basic survival being a problem. Many people will be unable to service their loans and have their properties and vehicles repossessed. For some, access to competent healthcare services will become somewhat unaffordable.

Beyond your study of Sacred Scripture, your competence in your field of knowledge will be very much needed by the many suffering people in order to help them to get on with life. The onus will be upon you to provide care for these people within and without the Church in ways that the Church would otherwise not be able to do.

It is my sincere hope as a deacon that you prepare yourself to be relevant to the impending state of society wherein humanity beckons you to come and be a source of help and hope. It matters little whether you are a doctor, lawyer, clerk, teacher, fireman, builder,

homemaker, or a retiree from your last profession years ago; your professional wisdom and competence will be of help in giving people a sense of assurance and direction in the months to come. Do ready yourself by further deepening your competence in these fields of service to humanity.

## **A SPECIAL NOTE ON OUR CHILDREN**

These monastic disciplines of prayer, work, and study do not only apply to us as adults. Where there are children in our homes, they should not be neglected as well during this season (and every other season of life). In varying and creative ways, we should apply these disciplines for their general wellbeing.

We all know that children are always in need of a healthy regiment to regulate the way they use their time throughout a day. On normal school days and when daddy and mummy are working, their lives are very much cut out for them. However, throughout these

unprecedented times, being unable to attend school and following a usual routine should not preclude them from having a proper daily discipline established for their wellbeing and health. Left to their own devices, they tend to be lost and rather helpless.

I am by no means a child psychologist; but being a parent and an educator, I am well aware that my nine-year-old son needs a proper routine and not be left to while his time away each day of this lockdown season. Several days after the lockdown began, I sat down with him to work out an agreed upon daily routine with him.

Each morning after he wakes up, he begins his day with praying one decade of the Rosary, which includes the Our Father, the Glory Be, and ten Hail Mary's. Throughout the day, he then needs to spend time attending to the following:

- 1) His academic curriculum. His school teachers have allocated daily tasks to their students using the internet, and he is required to complete these

tasks. Where there is no work given for the day, we require for him to do some exercises from a workbook that his mummy had acquired for him just before the lockdown began.

- 2) His faith education curriculum. During this season, our parish catechism programme is suspended. Rather than taking it lightly, his mummy assists him in revising the past lessons of his catechism programme, after which she quizzes him on what he has learned in order to help him with his retention. It is my hope that parents are not indifferent about their children's catechism lessons that are left out because of this lockdown and will do everything they can to ensure the sustenance of their children's faith.
- 3) Assisting in house chores. For my son, this takes place in the form of either drying the dishes after a meal, filling the water bottles of all the family members, changing the bed linens, sweeping the floor, or tidying his bedroom and his drawers.

- 4) Hydration of his body. He is required to finish three bottles of plain water each day, which comes to a total of just over two litres of water to keep himself hydrated.
- 5) Recreational reading. He is given ample time to read story books, which he very much loves and is always encouraged to do.
- 6) Consumption of electronic media. He is allowed to watch children's shows on social media (usually on Youtube or Netflix) for an hour a day. If he has done his duties well throughout the day, I usually reward him with some extra time at the end of the day.

By the end of each day, he spends his final waking hour with the family praying the Liturgy of the Hours (Vespers) together. During this prayer, we also remember the intentions of all those who have requested for our intercessions on their behalves. Our prayers are then concluded with the Angelus, the Prayer to Saint Michael

the Archangel, and also the Prayer to Our Guardian Angels. When he is ready for bed, he bids each family member goodnight, and I as his daddy will invoke a blessing upon him for the night. He then goes to bed, where he is allowed to read his story books until he falls asleep.

It is normal behaviour when our children feel lost and restless during such times when there are no proper routines. They are unable to join all the events taking place in their schools, at their tuition or childcare centres, their sporting activities and other recreational activities. The onus rests on us as their parents to establish a proper daily routine for them and to help them to observe these disciplines in order to keep them physically, spiritually, emotionally and mentally healthy. If we observe these suggested guidelines, I believe our children will brave through this challenging period without much exceptional trouble.

## A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO DIVINE PRESENCE

In establishing the disciplines of prayer, work, and study, Saint Benedict was not attempting to create something novel or to complicate the Christian life. In fact, he was attempting to simplify it so that even the simplest of minds could understand these disciplines as a Christian's loving response to God's presence in our lives.

The call is not for all of God's People to be monks. But it is nevertheless very much a call for all of us to return into the cloisters of our hearts where God is truly and deeply present. There we are called to meet Him and to be with Him. Too much in the exterior world has summoned our attention – even social activities in Church – at the expense of our interiority.

The “nothingness” of this season greets us with an invitation to enter once again into that sacred space of our lives. The word “monk” comes from the Greek word *monachos*, which refers to “singleness of heart”. Our

hearts have probably been too divided because of life's many obligations, our personal passions, and also our gravitation towards sin.

Well then, there is no better time than now to address the issue of our modern spiritual malady. I have put in my best effort to write this booklet from my desk in as short a time as I could. As a humble deacon of the Holy Church, I have found myself worried for many of you – my brothers and sisters – who may have felt somewhat lost because of the unusual circumstances we live in. Know that God is with you, and He does not fail to continue steering His Church through the storms of life. Remember that the Holy Catholic Church has survived various civilisations that have come and gone, and here she still stands today in the midst of human crisis. Long after the current circumstances pass, and if Her Bridegroom does not yet return, she will continue being present until the coming again of Christ our Lord. In this we can take courage and be confident.



In the meantime, what truly matters for each of us is to pay attention to the obligations of the present moment. Do not forsake your wellbeing, and do not forsake your faith in God and His Church. In cultivating this Rule of prayer, work, and study, make the goal of Saint Benedict your own: *ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus*, “that in all things God may be glorified” (Rule of Saint Benedict 57).



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