

THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC – OFS PRESENTATION:

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many of us to stay at home or to practice social distancing if we have to go out. This can create a sense of distance from one another, and we might become lonely as we lose that personal touch with our wider circle of brothers and sisters.

As David Couturier OFM Cap recently stated social distancing “goes against so much of our culture and psyche. We want to be close. We want to touch. We want to embrace and hug one another.”

Not being able to do this can easily lead to a sense of isolation and unrest especially if we are in what has been described as being vulnerable due to age or any pre-existing medical conditions.

As David Couturier OFM Cap further noted “the challenge we face in this time of pandemic is how to deal creatively, contemplatively, and constructively with distance.”

But for many of us our spiritual and fraternal life has not stopped. Individuals and fraternities are discovering new ways to meet virtually on plenty of online video platforms.

Google searches for the word “prayer” have skyrocketed in recent months, apparently in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

The Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison (a practising Christian), for one, said his “prayer knees were getting a good workout” as he prayed for the nation and for religious communities facing the closure of sacred meeting spaces due to the pandemic.

Perhaps many of us have been attending the celebration of the Eucharist online, live streamed from our parishes or cathedrals. While this might give us a sense of connectedness in hearing the Word of God and participating in a virtual “Liturgy of the Eucharist”. It still cannot replace the personal contact and the actual reception of the Body and Blood of Christ.

And it is not just traditional religious communities that are coming together in virtual assembly. So many people are turning to such things as “virtual prayer groups”, “virtual fraternities” and many other groups whether for spiritual reasons or merely to connect with one another on a social level

The resilience of these groups in the face of adversity backs up the argument of scholars such as Boston University sociologist Nancy T. Ammerman, who argue the spiritual and religious are not so distinct from one another as popular opinion would have us believe.

Religious and spiritual practices deliver something special when they are done socially – a deep sense of community and connection with something larger than us.

Throughout history, various religious and spiritual groups have adapted to changed circumstances and new technology. This current move to embrace live-streaming and video conferencing is no different.

While these technological changes have shown promise in meeting people's more immediate spiritual concerns, months of self-isolation, rising unemployment and mounting death tolls will surely present fresh challenges.

But I am sure we are all discovering that online community outreach by members of our fraternities will likely not be enough. And what about our members who are not so technically minded and not able to join online gatherings.

And what about death and dying, of having to bid farewell online, and not being able to honour loved ones in funeral rites? The lack of these rituals, which bring people together, will surely affect the process of grieving.

Being able to leverage the digital domain to connect virtually is a great blessing in this crisis. But it is difficult to replace in-person human connection when we are at our most vulnerable.

Once we get through this, I am sure that our Secular Franciscan Order's rich religious and spiritual landscape will be awash again with colourful celebrations affirming the sanctity of real-world connection and community.

Nonetheless, some things will be forever changed by the crisis. And the new skills and online practices learned at this time will impact the ways Franciscans engage with the religious and spiritual into the future.

David Couturier OFM Cap concludes his reflection by stating:

“Our social distancing offers us opportunities to go deeper with one another to express our yearning to be closer and to hold and comfort one another. This

moment provides us a chance to express sentiments and feelings that are suppressed in our ordinarily rushed and crowded lives. Now is the time to be physically apart but spiritually connected, appreciative of the deepest bonds we have, in touch with the integral peace we have with God, with creation, and with one another. It is time to become ever more aware that Jesus is the God of all nearness and He is the Lord of every distance and in Him we live, move, and have our being.”

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