



Dear Confreres,

Greetings from our Villa Santa Maria community in Rome.

Under the stress of the virus we all have been jolted by the fault lines dividing our world. We have seen the effects of shocking disparities of wealth and new levels of poverty. The death rate from the virus is higher among certain already disadvantaged groups. Unjust disparity between races and ethnicities has been exposed for the all-pervasive evil it is. The virus has shown how we can disregard our elderly and vulnerable sisters and brothers when they can seem to become a burden for others. We are further divided on how to deal with the fears around another ecological crisis to follow.

The Gospel calls us to strive for peace and reconciliation, for the justice of the “reign of God”. Whether we are able to celebrate the seven Sacraments or not, we are always called to be signs and sacraments of Jesus Christ who reaches out to those who were suffering and who reconciles people with each other and with God. Always trusting in God who saves, we are called to be joyful ministers of reconciliation.

Our last General Chapter proclaims that “like Mary, Marists are called to be bridge builders, instruments of reconciliation, bearers of the Good News...” (2017 Gen. Chapter, no. 6). This is the time to respond to this call to work for justice and reconciliation as our world is being torn apart by so many divisions exposed by this virus.

This Covid-19 Marist Newsletter gives us three examples of Marists working towards reconciliation in our world, building bridges across divisions. We hear from Hubert Bonnet-Eymard from France and serving in London, Patrick O’Neil from New Zealand ministering in northern Brazil and Stephen Truscott in Perth, Australia, working globally with digital technology. Thank you for sharing your stories.

Each of us has his own story to tell. All of us as Marists, working closely with others, are called to be “bridge-builders and reconcilers, disciples who bring the Good News”, especially in these times of division and pain highlighted by a perverse virus. Our own fraternity can be a sign of hope, a sacrament, for a divided world. Let’s support each other by our prayer, our fraternal interest and our encouragement and let’s reach out to others by our loving service of our God who reconciles and heals.

A blessed Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus today and of the Immaculate Heart of Mary tomorrow.

*John Larsen s.m.*

Since mid March, all sectors of the parish of Notre Dame de France (London) have had to close their doors: the chaplaincy of the French schools, the sandwich service, the night shelter, the refugee center, and even the church itself had to be locked down. Leicester Square, which is usually such a vibrant place, is desert and silent.



But all of this didn't make us stop! The eight people residing in our house met each other every morning, at due distance, for a meditation and Divine Office, and again in the evening for the eucharist. We have had to roll up our sleeves to do all domestic tasks of the house, cleaning and cooking. Every morning the five confreres of the community met also for a briefing, to look at possible ways to face the confinement measures and to support each other mutually. On Sundays we did our best to share

our prayer with as many of the faithful as possible, thanks to the online broadcast of our Sunday celebrations.

Some of our employees have been continuing their job from home, and others have taken a some partial furlough, which was decided by the British Government to allow people to stay home and to continue receiving some salary.

And yes, life goes on! The whole team of Notre Dame de France, religious and lay, is making a big effort to keep in touch with many people. Hours are passed on the phone, in front of our screens, on the internet, on the social networks. There are all kinds of meetings: sessions with fiancées who have had to postpone their wedding dates, phone contact with the refugees and asylum seekers, with



parents of the children and youngsters of the chaplaincy, meetings online with scouts, accompaniment of the catechumens, participation in virtual meetings of all kinds of groups, such as young adults, Christian businessmen and managers, interreligious, the team of "Maristes en education", the monthly ecumenical breakfast between the heads of the Westminster Churches... to all of this should be added the thousands of initiatives by members of the parish community to serve the most vulnerable, to pray together by zoom or to simply exchange news.



To these more pastoral commitments we should add also a series of more institutional meetings, such as the pastoral teams, the NDF team, the parish council, finances, coordination of volunteers engaged in the refugee center or in the work with the homeless.

All of these were essential to be able to guarantee the preservation of our relationship with those who are linked to Notre Dame de France, and to reflect together on how to proceed best in these challenging times and also about how to work towards the time of post-lockdown.



For several weeks the sandwich-service has been operative again, in coordination with other initiatives on the area of Westminster (see the article of Ivan Vodopivec in the recent European newsletter). From 15 June we have been able to open the doors of the church for personal prayer, but we don't know yet when we will be able to celebrate Mass publicly again, which is very disappointing. We accept with patience this difficult situation, while we try to be creative and courageous. We feel the need to reflect on the experience of this pandemic and of the binding confinement rules and all its consequences on the pastoral field – service to the poor, education, liturgy, preparation for the sacraments – and also on how we function financially. Our hope is that we can be open to the signs of our times, and to continue being available for the mission: that of being “an evangelizing community in word and action”.

# Bahia (Brazil) from Patrick O'Neill

My first contact with Covid-19 restrictions was in New Zealand while I was on holiday. When I returned to Brasil in February there was little or no recognition of the size of the Pandemic that was about to sweep the world. All that changed as we advanced into March and the new coronavirus advanced into all the major capitals of Brasil and tourist spots, including Salvador, the State Capital of Bahia. Even so no one was very worried as it was Carnival time.



It wasn't until March 12 that the first restrictions were circulated by our local Bishop. We were advised that there were to be no meetings of catechism, marriage preparation, formation in faith – any gathering that would bring together groups of people. At the same time Municipal authorities also began to restrict the number of people so that here in Iuiú (pop.:11,000), the parish for which I have special responsibility, we were limited to 20 people. We had to advise other neighbouring communities not to come in order to reduce the numbers and celebrate in the open air.

From that moment on it was a race to adapt to the new reality of people basically being confined to their homes and only allowed out to do essential shopping. People over 60 years old, considered part of the high risk group, were encouraged to stay at home as well as those with other illnesses. I was no longer able to visit the sick or take communion to the Elderly.

There has been an increase in the number of families reciting the Rosary and celebrating Word Services in their homes as the idea that the family is the “domestic church” becomes a reality. People also pray to Our Lady, Mother of God and Men, Queen of the Sertão for protection. This devotion is centred on a Statue that was brought from Portugal in 1742 and is in the Church at Palmas de Monte Alto, the home base of our mission in Bahia.

I celebrate a daily Mass in the Parish House, which I broadcast via Instagram. Both myself and the other members of the community produce daily messages for the various WhatsApp groups in our parishes and do our best to remain in touch with the parochial leaders. Father Lauro has produced a series of reflections on the Creed for YouTube which has been very well received within the Diocese. Father José Maria, the Regional Vicar, keeps in constant touch with the 10 parishes that make up our Vicariate in order to keep up with the differing realities on the area.



# Bahia (Brazil) (2)

Here in Iuiu I have encouraged, as have the others Marists in their respective parishes, generosity in donating food parcels for the most vulnerable. Although there is some government assistance this crisis has highlighted the fact that a significant number of people simply do not exist in the eyes of the State. They are without birth certificates or any other recognized documents.



From the start of this emergency we, the Marist Community, took the decision not to abandon our parishes. We could have retreated to our base in Palmas de Monte Alto and wait out the crisis there living in community. However it was felt that it was important to be present with the people in their hour of need. A decision which has meant a lot to each of the parishes we serve and welcomed by our Bishop. We Marists were able to stretch our “bubble” to come together in Palmas de Monte Alto on most Mondays and Tuesdays. We were even able to celebrate the Feast of St. Peter Chanel together.



All that ended at the beginning of June when suddenly the authorities announced that they had discovered 15 cases of Covid-19 among workers of a transmission line company who were considered to be essential workers. I have not been back to Palmas de Monte Alto since due to the fact that I am considered in the risk group and if I were to go there I would be required to spend a week in compulsory isolation when

I returned to Iuiu. Of all the towns in the region Iuiu is the only one without any cases of Covid-19 and the authorities want to keep it that way. For the past 90 days there has been a roadblock 24/7 on the only road into the area. Everyone is stopped. Details and temperature taken and the car sprayed with disinfectant. Anyone from São Paulo, Brasília, Salvador or any region with Covid-19 must do a monitored 14-day quarantine before being allowed to circulate in the town and countryside. Although I feel safe here in Iuiu I am profoundly worried about the situation in the rest of Brasil because there are so many cases and deaths.

# On-Line Accompaniment from Stephen Truscott



Our Australian confrere Stephen Truscott assists individuals, groups and organisations through counselling, spiritual accompaniment, professional supervision, retreats, organisational reviews and vocational assessment. Recently *CathNews New Zealand* published an article on his work, here below you find a synthesis of this article. For the full article: <https://cathnews.co.nz/2020/05/04/digital-spiritual-direction/>

Spiritual direction, counselling and supervision are traditionally people-centred services; face-to-face, and in-person activities and the Coronavirus and lockdown threatened to place more pressure on people in need of these very human services.

For six years I have been working at developing and enhancing a digital and in-person practice, mainly for people I accompanied who moved interstate or transferred overseas, or those with a disability and who found the travel awkward; the tyranny of distance made it impossible for us to meet. While I was attracted to the concept of connecting with my long-distance companions, embracing this new approach was quite daunting; I am not a digital native.

From a business practice perspective, like many others lockdown here in Australia this would prove challenging. Prior to the pandemic, I met with between 5-10% of people through digital technology, now about 85% of those whom I previously met face-to-face have switched to meet through digital technology.

## **Global is the new local**

Several years ago, as I began to re-image how I might offer a dual practice; both digital and in-person I turned to a Kiwi colleague who opened my eyes to see that “the global is the new local” and that I no longer needed to be physically limited by time and place in which I meet with clients.

“Global services are as accessible as local services,” the colleague said, and that living in Western Australia, I can easily meet with people in different countries. Suddenly my small Perth practice was conveniently able to be in downtown Hong Kong, Singapore, Seoul, Tokyo, Bangkok and Manila, and even despite the 4-hour difference, I also meet New Zealand clients.

# On-Line Accompaniment (2)

## **On-line confidentiality**

While appreciating the convenience of accompanying people in a digital environment, I was concerned about how to protect their confidentiality. Many popular and generally free videoconferencing options may be convenient, but questions linger about their security and privacy measures. I decided to sign up to a paid secure, encrypted service. And for six years, applying secure procedures I have been using Zoom. It is easy for clients to use and while ease of use is one thing, I am very pleased to learn that Zoom recently put increased emphasis on their security and improved it somewhat.

Having developed a digital approach supported by suitable procedures, I hope digital technology continues to help me serve my clients and support them in their lives. At the end of it, whenever that maybe, I will be interested to see how many digital clients switch from the convenience of their place to in-person appointments.