

Experiencing Blessings During the Pandemic

By Sister Kathleen Kluthe, SSSF

It has been almost a year since our lockdown and isolation began because of the worldwide pandemic. Who would have ever thought it really would last this long? But here we are, marking more than 526,000 deaths in the United States from COVID-19.



We have witnessed so many losses and heartaches, so much pain and suffering. We have also seen so many heroes on the front lines everywhere. My heart breaks for the intense suffering around the world. These same hardships are being endured by our sisters (and the people they work with) around the world in India, Germany, Switzerland, Africa, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Peru, Honduras, and Mexico.

I personally understand a little of the grief.

An aunt and two of my cousins died of COVID-19 and we were not able to gather as family for their funerals. We were not able to gather with my sister-in-law Lois and her five children and their families to mark the first anniversary of my brother Mel's death. We also were not able to have a celebration of life for two of our sisters at New Cassel Retirement Center who died during this time of the pandemic, Sisters Maureen Connelly and Jan Guenther. Hopefully this summer we can celebrate their lives with a beautiful memorial Mass.

I have been blessed to continue working as a chaplain for Serene Care Hospice during this entire time. For some time now, I have not been able to visit patients face to face because of the restrictions at the assisted living facilities and private homes. We understand that the quarantine precautions are necessary to help keep the patients safe, but it is still hard not to have in-person encounters. It was especially difficult for families of loved ones when various facilities were on total lockdown because of positive COVID cases.

During this year, I kept busy calling hospice patients and their families regularly to offer support, concern, compassion, and daily prayers during this difficult time of isolation. In some cases we could only make a window visit, or spend one hour a week by appointment at end of life.

Families are grateful for the chance to share their grief, frustration, and sadness, and often to also share the blessings of their loved ones' life. Of course I have all the necessary time to listen to these families.

This has been a challenging but wonderful ministry for me at this time of my life. It was so nice to be able to work from home and not have to travel the many miles around Omaha during all our blizzards and freezing Arctic temperatures. This time of being homebound and only occasionally going to the hospice office gave me sacred space with an endless well of blessings for extra quiet, longer periods of daily prayer and meditation, and reflective and meaningful music. I had time for daily exercise, more cooking than usual, and lots of phone calls with family, friends, and sisters around the world (free with WhatsApp).

I also learned to use Zoom video conferencing to keep connected to various people and groups: weekly updates on our hospice patients and families and bi-monthly calls as a spiritual assistant with our Omaha Secular Franciscans. There were also calls with the board of directors for New Cassel, where we did our best to support and affirm the awesome job that the many employees did for the 160 residents during the most challenging time of isolation, quarantine, and lockdown, especially when there were COVID cases.

Another important blessing during this pandemic was finding a meditation book that continues to help me "survive" the chaos, violence, lies, and injustice in the social and political news. In her book *Hunger for Hope: Prophetic Communities, Contemplation, and the Common Good*, Sister Simone Campbell shares her struggle with injustice and lies by maintaining a spiritual practice of deep contemplation. It is there that she finds hope, and she inspires her readers to find hope in this way also.

Finally, I want to share this prayer-reflection that has taken on a deeper meaning for me and has given me peace and strength to take one day at a time. It's called "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own," by Bishop Ken Untener, the late bishop of Saginaw, Michigan:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is
God's work.*

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying

That the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

*No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
This is what we are about:
We plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders,
ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.*

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