



# COVID-19 CRISIS: LESSONS FOR THE RELIGIOUS/CHRISTIAN LIFE – DURING AND AFTER

*Estelle M. Sogbou*

## Abstract

*This article reflects on the challenges and lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic for religious life. The aim is to share some of the exhortations based on the challenges and the transformations that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to Christians. It provides some analysis of what the crisis, an unexpected storm, has revealed to an African Christian. It approaches the topic from the views of clergy, the religious and faithful of the Catholic Church, and calls for all people to help in rebuilding the world during and after COVID-19. The lesson is to see the pandemic as an opportunity for the renewal of religious life, and for the Church. It holds that the work of rebuilding is not only for our religious communities but also for the whole human race. It is argued that the COVID-19 crisis challenges the Church and all Christians to discover afresh their prophetic vocation.*

## Introduction

On the 17th March 2020, the French government implemented a total lockdown and said the possible date of lifting the lockdown is uncertain ([www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron](http://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron)). As of the time of writing up this paper, France has been under lockdown for almost three months. Life changed for all sectors of life, religious life not excluded. Indeed, it has hit my religious community, the Catholic Chemin Neuf Community in France, hard, just as it has many other religious communities worldwide. For us, everything has become unpredictable and religious life, too, runs the risk of being destabilized. Religious community life needs stability, space for contemplation, community gathering, prayer, and in some cases pastoral care in its diverse forms (counselling, retreat, parish evangelization). But the COVID-19 pandemic and its corollaries are like an unexpected turbulent storm that has hit religious communities hard and brought with it many challenges. It has shaken the foundations of daily life, communities' sources of income, prayer life and has indeed led to

one important question about the meaning of this situation and its message for the Catholic Church and the world. My personal side of the story needs to come out. Thus, my reflection has its source both in my daily life at the Abbey Our Lady des Dombes, in Ain (France), as an African nun and theologian faced with this upheaval.

In a time when the Roman Catholic Church throughout the world has lost credibility because of all the scandals it has faced, perhaps this crisis situation that also touched the Church, including through the lockdown, can be seen as an opportunity for renewal. Hence, to talk about the impact of the pandemic on religious life is a way to say that the pandemic presents an opportunity for the Roman Catholic Church, an opportunity for seeing how far humanity has drifted from its core values of solidarity and kindness, as it allows us to see how we are interconnected more than we think. These connections go beyond boundaries, beyond continents, beyond gender and religions. It is therefore imperative we start to search and pitch together to see which lessons may be learnt from the crisis provoked by COVID-19, especially for me here as it concerns my Christian life.

Admittedly, the COVID-19 pandemic is not over yet and the primary question of when it will be over remains unanswered. Hence, most of the lessons to be learnt are still some way off – maybe more than a year off. Nevertheless, the situation as it stands at present reveals some points which we can and must deal with.

The aim of this paper is to share the challenges and the transformations that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to me as an African Christian in Lyon, and to others who have committed their life to one in the monastery. The approach is based on highlighting various exhortations made by persons of authority in Catholic Christian religious communities (the Pope, abbots, and nuns) alongside other testimonies of religious establishments. Different lessons will be identified (without a ranking of value between them), followed by a conclusion. Beyond this narrower illustration of the religious life in monastic or apostolic life, the COVID-19 lessons could be taken as new proposals for Catholic Christians.

## **When the Mask Falls**

“An unexpected turbulent storm ...” These were the words Pope Francis used to describe the pandemic. Pope Francis decided to hold a prayer for the world on Saint Peter’s Square on the 27th March 2020. His intention

was to pray for all the victims of COVID-19 and for healing. During this prayer time, he offered a homily from Mark 4:34-41. As part of this, the Pope said:

We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are in the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying "We are perishing" (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.

([http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200327\\_omelia-epidemia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html))

These words of Pope Francis describe very well not only the global nature of the situation but also and particularly the connectedness of human beings. This storm was like a stark revelation of the truth of the human condition: of the fragility, the fears and the temptations of life, and of the vanity of power. Our fragility is often hidden – especially among and by the powerful and privileged. However, with this COVID-19 crisis, the vulnerability and the pride of all human beings, including those building a Tower of Babel to control everything, have been exposed. All are restricted, confined, at risk of the virus. Humans appear in their true and exposed dependence. The mask that all of us wear in our daily life has fallen, exposing our real image to face the pandemic.

Pope Francis says further in his homily:

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits, and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed [ourselves] to become dull and feeble about the very things that nourish, sustain, and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly 'save' us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity. In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters."

([http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200327\\_omelia-epidemia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html))

It is understandable that for Pope Francis the pandemic became an important moment, even a blessing, albeit in disguise, which can make us return to our “primary state”. This “primary state” should not be understood in a romanticized perspective, but in terms of the way that our existence is related to one another. We belong to each other. We can rediscover that equality as we stand equal before shared pain and suffering. The pandemic situation has told us that we are bonded to one another. It is exceedingly difficult to see who is poor or rich because we all confront the same pandemic. Furthermore, the situation is leading us for the Lord, leading us to recognize who He is.

***First Lesson: “Be still, and know that I am God” Psalm 40:10***

The world seems to have stopped and is practically shut down. Different activities, economies, social and political life, journeys, entertainments, are all shut down. Public religious life and service, the Eucharist celebrations, and all those others where the faithful gather physically, are shut down. It has been a big fast from these activities; indeed, it seems like universal abstinence. Silence seems to have won and many hearts and souls are confused, even reason seems to be losing in the battle in the lives of many people. It is time for me to be still.

This big “stop” imposed by the COVID-19 contagion and by political authorities is being seen as a necessary evil. This is because some people in our contemporary world do not know anymore how to stop or slow down. They seem to be in a hurry in the fast lane of life. They only halt when they are forced. To stop on their own, from personal will, seems impossible. Such people have got used to running also in the religious apostolic life. The Church’s pastoral care ought to have provided more and more initiatives to make life orderly. Unfortunately, only unpleasant setbacks like the present COVID-19 pandemic that has called for lockdown in multiple nations can stop us in our race. And, as it were, the coronavirus pandemic seems to have stopped almost everyone. Our plans and projects have been cancelled and we do not know for how long.

To stop and take a break, however, signals a time to find out and discover the present, a call to live right in the here and now and to evaluate the reality of time, which will make us appreciate our own reality, our life, ourselves, the things that matter most. This reminds us that humans can

only ever live in the present, though we always have the temptation to get stuck in the past, which no more exists, or to project ourselves into the future, which also does not exist and perhaps might not come.

In the Scriptures we read in Psalm 46 that God invites us to halt and to recognize his presence in our midst. He speaks:

Be still and know that I am God!  
I will be honoured by every nation.  
I will be honoured throughout the world.  
The Lord of Heaven's Armies is here among us;  
The God of Israel is our fortress. (Ps 46: 10-11; NLT)

These ancient words speak profoundly in our present. The Lord is asking us to halt. He does not force us to act frenetically. He just wishes that we stop and stay with Him, freely, by choice, that means by and with love. He does not stop us like in a police arrest. He wants that we stop before Him just like we stop before a beloved one, or like we stop before the beauty of a new-born, like when we gaze at a sunset with amazement in our eyes – still and silent. Being still for the Lord means that His presence fills the now and so satisfies all our heart, whatever the conditions and the circumstances in which we are. It also touches the heart of the vocation.

To live in this COVID-19 storm and to make sense of it leads to a new reflection on the fundamental vocation of the religious life and the sense of this commitment when circumstances are changing. The call of God to be still does not throw away the thought of fears or anguish. It signifies a move to accept an uncomfortable situation, with trust. In fact, we can think that like with a magic word or mantra, our fears and prayers will make the anguish, or the bad thoughts disappear. The Lord's invitation also means that He is with us in this difficult situation, to believe in the peace that only God can give. For Sister Veronique Margron (OP) (2020) in one of her statements on air during the lockdown, she said:

But the virus mocks our positive thinking as anxious. These thoughts do not affect events. Believing otherwise still maintains the illusion of an omnipotence that has done us so much harm. I wish us to simply consent to the feelings that we have, to our 'intranquillité' restlessness for the other, deeply believing that the peace that comes from our God is given in this very place, during all these days (translation mine).

Our present situation is an invitation to accept our humanity as it is: with its fears, lack of comfort, bad and good thoughts. Sometimes, this anxiety

during the crisis is for our fellows a sign of our solidarity in humanity. At this point, it is important to underline the place of the body.

### ***Second Lesson: Re-membering the Body***

Being still for the Lord presupposes restlessness, even the restlessness of the body. The silence that covers the world also puts the body into silence. Physical distancing has been recommended as an occasion to redefine how we deal with our body. The exchange of pleasantries with words is allowed and this goes through our senses. We use some senses more than others: sight and hearing are more prominent than smell, taste, and touch. But if there is something that we miss very much during this time, it is touch. For some African Christians, as it is in most places in the world, the touch, the hug, is our way to be in the world. We are used to touching each other. Physical distancing has limited our way of being: not to come near to each other and sometimes to be very far apart. The apprehension of this distancing reveals how sometimes it can be too much in closer proximity and to cross over some boundaries. However, we can notice the lack of touching and being touched. This lack of touching and being touched explains how important all the senses of our human body are, not only, or above all, sight and hearing. That is why Brother David, the Abbot of a Benedictine monastery chose to address this issue in an interview during the pandemic in these terms:

It is, however, the meaning that is the most vital and, at this time, the most questioned. Touch is the first sense that awakens, in the baby who, from birth, needs to be caressed, and the last one that falls asleep: the sick person in a coma still needs someone to take his hand to accompany him to death. Touch is a disinherited sense in our society. It is clear that the ongoing social distancing will allow this dimension of contact to be revalued. Being in the physical presence of my friends is different from talking to them by videoconference or telephone. Perhaps we will finally realize how sad it is to see all these people around a table, at the time of the aperitif, keeping their eyes glued to their respective mobile phones (translation mine).

In fact, relationships that take place ‘online’ and through social media do support physical distance. However, online relationships cannot become all that human beings need. Our humanity is expressed not only through imaginations, but also from bodily action. Therefore, the rediscovery of the place of the body and appreciating the body in a time of growing virtual existence is what we could learn in this stormy time. In other words,

it means to accept and inhabit our humanity, even as this humanity is experiencing this storm as a constraint.

### ***Third Lesson: Troubled but Free***

The COVID-19 storm, lockdown and other consequences have not been a choice. Actually, we do not have a choice except to live with it. The religious life is founded on choice, a real liberty of choice. But what will happen when we do not have a choice, even the liberty of choice? What does liberty mean in this situation? Dom Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori (2020:3), the general Abbot of the Cistercian Order writes in his letter for the members of the Order thus:

That we can live it with freedom, even if constrained. Freedom is not choosing always and anyway that which we want. Freedom is the grace to be able to choose that which gives fullness to our heart even when all is taken from us. Even when our freedom is taken from us, the presence of God preserves us and offers the supreme freedom of being able to stop before Him, to recognize Him as present and as a friend. This is the great testimony of the martyrs and all the saints.

This concept of freedom as proposed by Lepori is based on the deep relationship with God that gives sense to the religious life. It is not about choosing what one wants, but choosing what gives one the most opportunity for peace and fullness. It is no more the beginning of the action but what will be the finality, the aim. The first and main point is to stay in God. The freedom does not become an absolute and unique criterion of any acting or being. The absolute freedom is the one that God himself gives and the one we can choose with him. In this COVID-19 storm, the only one who remains free in acting is Jesus himself. He can walk above the waters, approach the disciples without being stopped by nature. He is the one who does not know opposition. Freedom is freedom in Jesus. That is also what Dom Mauro-Giuseppe (2020:3) writes to the monks and nuns of his order:

It would also be blasphemous to think that God sends us these trials Himself to then show us how good he is in freeing us from them. God enters our trials, he suffers them with us and for us, to the point of death on the Cross. Thus, he reveals to us that our life, in trial as also in consolation, has an infinitely greater meaning than the resolution of the current peril.

In other words, this COVID-19 situation does not take away our freedom, because God is in it. He set us free by living with us in this constraint. We always do have a choice when we can see that Jesus is there with us.

Women in particular, especially in Africa, have suffered so much in times past from a myriad of calamities. African women need to take cognizance that God is with us in the wake of this COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, in all the troubles that African women face, God has been by their side. In the words of Teresia Mbari (2017:78):

Since women live in the same historical circumstance that has led the affirmation of Jesus as being on their side, wishing to affirm them when they were disempowered and alienated, I would say that African women would take part of the affirmation of Christ. They celebrate the fact that Christ empowers them to fight against social injustice. By the same token, Jesus is on their side as they fight for liberation from sexist attitudes and practice in society.

With Christ on the side of African women, as well as all women in the world, Freedom remains the work of Christ and he is the only one who can give freedom from all constraints and oppression, even during a pandemic. For a religious person, it becomes a calling, a vocation for more solidarity with the oppressed, the socially excluded and segregated.

#### ***Fourth Lesson: Existing for the Other***

The German Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1998:588) wrote the following about the Church when he was in prison: “The Church is the Church only when it exists for others...not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others.” That is to say, if there is a great lesson for the Church during this pandemic, it is to reconsider her meaning to be a Church that exists for the other. It has to be expressed through the solidarity with the poor, with the suffering ones and in the prayer for and with all in another way, especially African women.

The Church through its clergy and religious persons of faith needs to teach all to exist for one another. One of the ways is the choice to make streaming-services under many different channels. Many religious communities, congregations and monasteries have chosen to stream the daily and Sunday services. This action has been named streaming-service or streaming-Mass. The streaming-services somehow make visible the body of Christ. Out of this initiative, the idea of community and belonging has



become more and more visible. It was for the sake of those who cannot take part in the service that the streaming-service was activated. However, sharing has always been difficult. There is the need to find a way to stay in touch when the possibility of the physical presence is not there is felt. Virtual presence becomes in this way an avenue to reach out to a body of members who could no longer be bodily present. This is indeed the paradox of being a body without a body. Chemin Neuf (2001) quotes the late Fr. Paul Couturier the founder of the Prayer Week for the unity of Christians as saying:

Suppose that each Thursday, when every week that Great Thursday is commemorated, and ever increasing multitude of Christians of every denomination were to form an immense network encircling the earth, like a vast invisible monastery in which all were caught up in Christ's prayer for Unity. Would that not be the dawn of Christian Unity breaking upon the world? Is not this the attitude of sincere, profound and burning spiritual emulation for which the Father is waiting in order to make Unity a visible reality? This Invisible Monastery is made up of all those souls to whom the Holy Spirit has made known, with an intimate understanding, and because they have really tried to open themselves to His fire and so to His light, the grievous state of divisions between Christians, and in whom this awareness has given rise to an enduring suffering and a corresponding regular practice of prayer and penitence ... The name 'Monastery' is appropriate because it is the same suffering, the same yearning, the same concerns, the same spiritual activity, the same goal which draw together into the heart of Christ this multitude which comes from every nation.... The cloister is none other than living in the Christ who prays for Unity.

The vision of Fr. Paul Couturier has become a reality and a place of new understanding, a better and deeper understanding of the Church beyond the walls, beyond the physical communities without having to throw this last one away but giving it a broader signification. In fact, it means that the visible Body of Christ possesses an especially important invisible part. For the religious life that means to inhabit deeper its vocation in the consecrated life: be there for the other and share their life beyond the convent. Another way is to be sensitive to the plight of others. Dom Mauro-Guiseppe (2020:4) in an advice to the religious expressed it further in his statement in the following words: "In reality, our vocation as baptized persons, like our vocation to consecrated life in the monastic form, should always help us and remind us to live like this. The current situation reminds us and all Christians a little bit of what St. Benedict says of the time of Lent

(cf. RB 49:1-3): we should always live like this, with this sensitivity to the drama of life.” Being sensitive to what goes on around us takes not only the form of prayer and a presence through the streaming-services but also in this imposed silence of the monasteries and convents. The choice to close the abbeys and monasteries and to welcome no guest also follows the sanitary advice. It is also a way to express solidarity with the most vulnerable. In fact, in many cloisters in France, the average age of the sisters and brothers is 65 years old. This (i.e. the elderly) is the demographic that is the most vulnerable to the virus. In order not to expose their brothers and sisters, the communities chose to close their guest houses. Therefore, many convents and monasteries have seen their incomes decrease like that of many other workers who lost their jobs. Here, the solidarity with the world is once again taking on a new face. Indeed, religious life is grounded in the poverty vow which is a form of solidarity.

Furthermore, COVID-19 crisis allows religious life to be lived no more as a privilege but to embrace the drama of the worldwide situation. In other words, it becomes more evident that the religious life should be lived with the conscience that we have responsibility for one another, that our lives are connected and bound together for the best and the worst of times. Moreover, all our actions and choices, even the most hidden or without significance, have consequences. The religious life becomes more and more a life in the middle of the world and with the world. It could be said that the world takes its place in religious life. Thus, we are in the same boat in this turbulent storm, as Pope Francis would say.

Again, the presence of the world is felt more in daily prayers of religious life. First of all, prayer is a normal part of religious life. Yet in this situation, it becomes like the main and specific responsibility to supply this commitment and also to beg for help in the offering of prayers. The specific vocation of the consecrated person as nun or monk receives again a resonance in her/his daily life. In this COVID-19 storm, in the vocation of a nun or a monk, in the vocation of prayer, it becomes a richness to have nothing other to do and through this to accomplish the mission of Jesus. So, the different media (internet, telephone...) that have been used are helping the world to come to the monastery. The streaming-services with chat features give the possibility to the faithful to be also part of worship through the sharing of their own prayer. It is no more only to pray for them but also to pray with them, that is in an invisible presence in the

communities in the morning prayer and Sunday services. This opportunity becomes a high responsibility and a top priority and task for all the world, a responsibility in faith in this vocation which the Lord through the Church has given to the religious life. It is important to be reminded that it is only a privilege because the consecrated person is not the best. On the contrary, it is because the consecrated knows that they only live from the mercy which they have to plead for each day. Moreover, this consciousness should grow so that there is no service or prayer which could not take place without this feeling present in the house of the faithful when they are present in the abbey. It is the unity of the Body of Christ, the great assembly of the baptized. In other words, it means to embrace the whole of humanity, to exist for it. In the communities, the Christians would have to answer the new call and challenges addressed to them.

This answer will be possible perhaps by learning from the crisis. Sr. Veronique Margron, OP (1944) makes this remarkable proposition:

What is expected of us, perhaps, is to be 'breach repairmen.' You will rebuild the ancient ruins, restore the age-old foundations. You will be called: He who repairs the breaches, He who restores the ways" (Isaiah 58:12). Repairing the breaches, putting the roads back into service, is not just about our communities, our future - when it must be done too - but about the bonds that unite us all. Of our common destiny, damaged by so many tragedies and by this collective trial, this catastrophe. Breach repair is not the same as before. Remember the little surveyor of Jerusalem (Zechariah 2:5). He comes to measure the city for its reconstruction, its width and length. But an angel makes him understand that 'Jerusalem must remain an open city, because of the number of men and cattle that will populate it' (Zechariah 2:8). A city whose glory will be the Lord Himself (*translation mine*).

So, let us not be mere little surveyors. But builders. Not pretentious people who would pretend to falsely wipe their memories clean. The whole depth of the history of religious life, of its audacity, of its capacity for innovation in favour of the abandoned of every age as well as of those thirsting for justice, beauty and truth, for God himself, invites us to risk a lucid hope in order to move forward into the future. The biblical accounts, the history of the Church, the living tradition of our communities' bear witness to this: something new can come from where it was not expected. Let us try together, whatever our strength, our number, our age, to be up to the task of 'speaking absolutely to men' as Saint-Exupéry also said in the same letter. This proposition opens a new call and vocation for the religious, but

moreover for all Christians. She proposes a new mentality towards the situation, which is for all people not to be a survivor but a builder.

## Conclusion

The mission of the Church and pastoral care should go on after the reopening (or end of the lockdown). It will never be the same and how it will be, no one knows it. The new situation will demand something new. However, this newness carries the marks and the wounds of the storm, for the World and the Church. It means that to start new again will call for all to be co-workers in the work of the Lord not only for our religious communities but also for the whole human race. After COVID 19, the rebuilding of our societies is the responsibility of all women and men.

## References

- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich (1998), *Widerstand und Ergebung. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, Gütersloh: Kaiser /Gütersloher Verlagshaus.
- Br David, « Nous on a choisi de vivre confinés, et cela nous procure la stabilité », Interview by Jérôme Cordelier, Le Point May 04, 2020. Available online: [https://www.lepoint.fr/debats/frere-david-nous-on-a-choisi-de-vivre-confinés-et-cela-nous-procure-la-stabilité-05-04-2020-2370150\\_2.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/debats/frere-david-nous-on-a-choisi-de-vivre-confinés-et-cela-nous-procure-la-stabilité-05-04-2020-2370150_2.php) (Accessed 12 May 2020).
- Hinga, Teresia Mbari (2017), *African Christian Feminist. The enduring search for what matters*, New York: Orbis.
- Lepori, Dom Mauro-Guisepppe, OCist (15 March 2020), “Be still and know that I am God” Letter of the Abbot General O.Cist. for the time of epidemic.’ Available online: <http://www.ocist.org/ocist/images/pdf/ENepidemic.pdf>. (Accessed 12 May 2020).
- Margron, Veronique op (28 April 2020), ‘Aurons-nous changé?’ <https://www.viereligueuse.fr/Message-de-Sr-Veronique-Margron-Aurons-nous-change> (Accessed 12 May 2020).

- Margron, Veronique op (31 March 2020), 'Confinement: Consentir à notre in-tranquillité,' Editio RCF Available as audio 2 :30 <https://rcf.fr> (Accessed 12 May 2020).
- Neuf Chemin (2001), 'The Invisible Monastery: The Thursday Prayer.' Available online: <http://paulcouturier.faithweb.com/invisiblemonastery.html>. (Accessed 21 May 2020).
- Pope Francis (2020), 'Homely of the special Benediction Ubi et Orbi on the 27th March 2020.' [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200327\\_omelia-epidemia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html) (Accessed 21 May 2020).
- Sr Veronique Margron (31 March 2020), 'Confinement: Consentir à notre in-tranquillité.' Editio RCF, Available as audio 2 :30 (Accessed 12 May 2020).
- Sr Véronique Margron (28 April 2020), 'Message de Sr Véronique Margron: Aurons-nous changé?' Available online: <https://www.viereligieuse.fr/Message-de-Sr-Veronique-Margron-Aurons-nous-change>. (Accessed 12 May 2020).