

look like? This is a question everyone faces, and it brings with it more large-scale uncertainty about the future than we are used to, in our comfortable society. Many plans are on hold while the world waits to see how things will shake out. For us at Mississippi, for example, it has meant a halt in plans we were working on, to re-vamp our retreat facilities. All monasteries closed their guest houses in March, and we don't know when we will re-open. Even when we do, will we have as many guests as in the past? We have decided to wait, probably for a few years, before resuming our planning.

On the other hand, planning our annual candy production could not be put on hold for another year: we need to start production for our big fall season back in the spring. How much should we produce? Which items would we need to cut back the most?

These questions unite us to everyone else, facing similar questions. Or much bigger ones. Lockdowns and business closings affect the poor more than anyone else, and our hearts go out to those who have lost jobs, small businesses, careers, livelihoods. The lady in

Dubuque who runs a little business organizing bus tours in our area, often including a stop at our abbey – how is she supporting herself now? The little shops in town that sell our candy – most have re-opened, but they were out of business for months. How are their owners doing? To say nothing of all the working class people whose means of support have dried up indefinitely. So much to pray for!

Uncertainty about the future – yes, speaking of our earthly future. Our beautiful future in God is unchanged, and unchangeable. May our Lord Jesus use this time of waiting and suffering for his good purposes! So many today live without hope or meaning; so many are vulnerable to the lies that increasingly infiltrate our culture; so many have eyes only for the things of this world. If this earthly security is shaken, we can hope that many hearts will look for deeper meaning, many minds ask again the great questions of human existence.

And may this Advent be a season of hope and joy for you!

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Spreading out in choir for the Covid

Well, the big news for us is – we have very little news! This is actually a blessing in the monastery: it means our life is peaceful and uneventful, helping us stay focused on God.

Of course, like everyone else, we have been affected by the Covid-19. Since in any case we live, amazingly enough, a cloistered life, restrictions about going abroad do not require any significant change in lifestyle for us! We very much regret our families not being able to visit, stopping our hospitality to retreatants, not having outside presenters give us conferences, etc. But even this has had some benefits: more silence, less activity. That is to say, an experience of the blessings of our enclosure.

Since we stand close together in church, singing God's praises at various times of the day, any infection tends to spread very quickly indeed. So one of the first steps we took in March was to spread out in our church. By God's providence, we had just enough room to leave an empty stall between each sister.



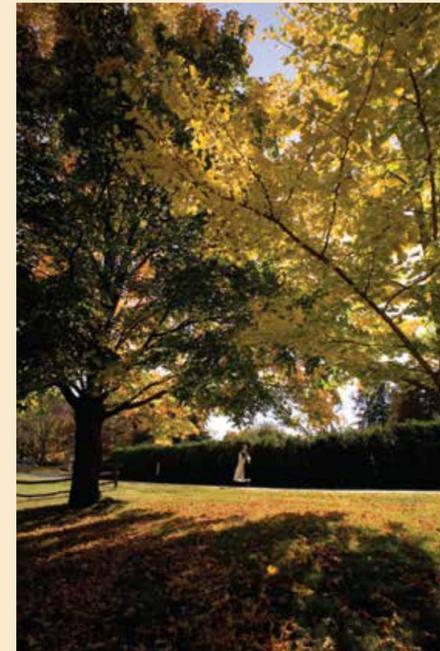
Our choir in "normal" times



Outside of Advent and Lent, we show a short educational video most Sunday evenings. In recent years we've seen a couple of series we can highly recommend:

The Catholic Church: A History. (Published by "The Great Courses"). Teacher: William R. Cook, SUNY Geneseo. 36 half-hour lectures. We have since learned that Professor Cook is a friend of our brothers in Geneseo, NY (Our Lady of the Geneseo Monastery – fellow Trappists). But we thought the lectures excellent even before we knew we had a connection.

Catholicism: The Pivotal Players (published by "The Word on Fire"). Teacher: Bishop Robert Barron. Most of these are an hour long, and each episode focuses on one person, such as John Henry Newman, Michelangelo, St Catherine of Siena. Also superb and highly watchable.



Bill Witt



Bill Witt

Our refectory—in “normal” times”

Spreading out in our refectory (monastic dining room) took a bit more re-arranging. Traditionally, refectories are designed, in both architecture and seating arrangement, to mimic the church. This is to give our communal meals, taken in silence or with holy reading, an atmosphere reminiscent of the liturgy. So normally we sit on only one side of the table, in long rows facing each other across the room. But making more space between sisters has meant finding a completely different arrangement.

There are two other steps we have also taken in relation to the pandemic. Back in the spring when food supplies were somewhat irregular we decided to give time and energy to a larger vegetable garden than usual. In addition to enjoying lots of fresh vegetables in the summer, we did a lot of canning and freezing, especially of tomato products: tomatoes, salsa, oodles of tomato sauce...

The other step came at the urging of a good friend of our community, concerned about the spiritual and emotional suffering the pandemic has caused. We started a series of short videos, each of a sister speaking for about 6-7 minutes on a topic of her choosing, with the general purpose of sharing with others the joy and hope that we know in Christ. As of this writing, we have posted 13 videos; there is a link to them from our abbey home page (mississippiabbey.org).

The biggest difference between our experience of the pandemic and that of all our friends “out in the



Spreading out for the Covid

world” has been that we continued to have daily Mass, even during the early lockdown. What an enormous blessing for us! The Mass is the heart of our day and its absence would change the whole flavor of our life. We stopped receiving from the chalice back in March, but that has not really touched our essential participation in the sacrament.

Now in October the Dubuque area is seeing its largest surge of the virus so far, although our two local hospitals have put out word that they still have room, at least for now. One of the priests in Dubuque is seriously ill with Covid-19, and several of the mother-houses of sisters in town have a number of cases. But



Our chief gardener with a whopping sweet potato!



Goodbye, cabin!

so far, our two Trappist monasteries (Mississippi and our brothers at New Melleray) have been spared. And we also hear, as you no doubt do too, that with what has been learned about treatment so far, the mortality rate of the disease has been declining. Our country and our world still have a long way to go, but for what improvements there have been, we praise God!

OUR BUILDINGS

Prompted partly by a desire to consume less fuel, we have taken down two buildings on our property. The “cabin,” which we bought in the summer of 1982, was originally the office in a car sales lot. With two very small rooms and some big beautiful windows, it was for many years a favorite spot for retreats, for both sisters and guests. We built wooden porches in front and in back, put awnings on the windows, and watched the trees grow tall around it. However, it had a chronic problem with the local wildlife also liking it. Eventually we had to stop making it available for guests, although we sisters continued to use it. But it was very inefficient in its heating. So last summer (2019) we removed the porches and sold the cabin; its new owners finally moved it out last month.

The other building that is disappearing is a house at the entrance to our property. We are not sure just when it was built, but the nails in the oldest part are a type used in the late 1800’s. This “gatehouse” was a family house, and various families inhabited it over the



Gatehouse grotto

decades. In our days it functioned for many years as the chaplain’s house.

Until about 15 years ago our brothers at New Melleray supplied us with a chaplain who lived on our property. One of our chaplains, dear Fr Jim Kerndt, lived at the gatehouse so long – 20 years! – that it got a new name: “Jim’s house.” It kept that name for some years, even after he returned to New Melleray because



Fr Jim (right) & friend BJ Weber



Goodbye, Gatehouse!

of his age and deteriorating physical condition. Eventually we no longer had a priest living on the property, and as it was not a “guest-worthy” building, we used the house ourselves, for our personal retreats or a monthly “hermit day.” Fr Jim died ten years ago, but until we emptied the last few things out, there were still some old recipe books in the kitchen with notes in Fr Jim’s hand – and somehow you always felt his peaceful spirit.

The trouble which prompted the removal of the gatehouse was not only inefficient use of fuel but above all a recurrent termite problem. Now the boiler needs to be replaced, and considering the amount of structural damage from the termites, it seems time for the gatehouse to go. So now we have removed what is useful that is not made of wood, and stripped off as much as we could of siding, flooring etc – anything that won’t burn well. Soon a wrecking company will come and knock the gatehouse down, and then we will burn what’s left, and gradually fill it with earth and grass.

Another reason for divesting ourselves of some heat-consuming structures is that last year we were able to buy a piece of land which starts right outside our “gate” and then runs along the side of our property, quite near our entrance road. With more and more housing going up around us, we are already coping with increased noise, so we are taking what steps we can to maintain a quiet, peaceful atmosphere for



Removing siding from the gatehouse.

ourselves and our guests. This new property also has a fairly new house on it. We have several plans for how best to use it, but one plan which will probably go forward is to move our gift shop there. Because we did not build a monastery from scratch but started with existing buildings not designed for monastic life, and because we are built on a narrow and steep bluff of land, we lack the physical enclosure a monastery normally has – above all, space where the sisters can walk in privacy and silence. Our present gift shop brings loads of casual visitors into spaces we can’t avoid in our daily life, so the prospect of moving the activity away from our front yard has met with pretty general approval.

THE FUTURE

But with our gift shop closed since March, its location is not an urgent question. We hear from other Trappist monasteries that they too have closed their gift shops (which incidentally also means that they are not buying our candy to resell). Some monasteries are not sure they will re-open their stores even when the pandemic is over. There’s not much doubt for us that we will re-open; in fact, in November and December we are allowing local folks to pre-order our candy and come pick it up at our candy factory.

But it is also clear that we will all need time to explore the post-pandemic world. What does “normal” mean, and what will a “return to normal”