

shutting yourself off from discussion? Are your own beliefs interfering with your ability to understand? Do you interrupt the other person to score a point? Is your own anger or impatience a barrier? Fourth, listen to God. (This should also be first.) Are you treating this person as a child of God or as an enemy? Is your purpose argument or discussion? Do you want to learn or to win? Do you understand that you are already in relationship with this person?

Listening seems like such a little thing, but it isn't. When we don't listen to people, they feel devalued, and then they devalue the lives of others. The turmoil in our

society comes from millions of people who are talking and shouting, but not listening. This brings us further and further apart from each other. Listening begins relationships and keeps them together. Listening is not agreement; it means that we respect each other. It confirms the dignity of each person. It opens the path to real discussion, and from there leads to understanding and peace.

We cannot solve the world's problems by ourselves. But, through listening and forming connections with those we meet, we can change the world we live in. May we bring our Franciscan peace and goodness to all our brothers and sisters.



## ENCOURAGEMENT, FELLOWSHIP AND PRAYER IN THE AGE OF PANDEMIC

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*“... For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.” (Romans 1:11,12)*

It is believed that Paul wrote these words to the Romans while on mission to Jerusalem. He was separated from the church by distance, but not in spirit, and writes to encourage them on their faith journey. In fact, the New Testament is filled with examples of early church members encouraging one another during times of separation, persecution, and fear from the very beginning. So why would it be unusual for us to want to encourage each other now?

Most of us can play the news reports in our head. Something bad is happening in China! Italy is going through the same thing! People are sick and they are dying! They are overwhelmed! All of Europe is bending to a horrible virus! A nursing

home in Washington State! New York is on lockdown! Dear God, please protect us. Please do not allow our churches to be closed. Fear, sadness, and loss were mounting. As this unfolded, our fraternities were scrambling to determine what we were going to do about meetings, retreats, etc.

For our fraternity, there were a few emergency conference calls by the Council. We had planned our first Lenten Day of Recollection for March 14 and were scheduled to meet the following Tuesday as a fraternity. Can we or should we meet? We were working with a minimal and ever-changing amount of information of what was being called a Pandemic. Can we still offer our first annual Lenten day of retreat? It includes

other fraternities and, of course, food. Is that safe? What about our monthly gatherings? Before too long, in a matter of days, the decision was made for us, and we had to cancel our meetings, retreats, travels and organized prayer meetings. We had already cancelled our events when the Massachusetts Governor and the Archbishop made the decision for us. Overnight, it seemed, the unthinkable had happened. We could not meet. We could not ask to have a mass celebrated with our fraternity! We could not attend mass. Everyone paused, waited, cried ... and then, before too long, as the anxiety settled, the Council met via teleconference once again to discuss what we could do to keep our fraternity alive and active; to encourage one another and to attempt to soothe the pain of isolation. Like all, we were stunned and broken but a remarkable thing happened... a way was opened with a strongly committed leadership... to begin again. *Nunc Coepi!*

We had heard about Zoom. Schools were using it. Government agencies were using it. Why couldn't we? So we scheduled our first Council meeting via Zoom! It worked. We decided to begin offering evening prayer to the fraternity members one or two nights per week. Another member of the Council wanted to pray the Stations of the Cross on Fridays during Lent. Another fraternity member thought perhaps praying the rosary together might be a good idea and so we began on Sunday. Suddenly we had a busier "meeting" schedule than ever; but it was working! We COULD be together to encourage one another and so we did!

As I write this, we have been meeting via the Zoom platform for several weeks. Yes, it does have limitations. We decided that inclusion is particularly important. If we are going to be meeting in a virtual way, we need to include all members of the fraternity, not just those with internet capabilities. Additionally, the free version of the software limits all meetings to 40 minutes after a trial period. With these limitations in mind, we decided to sign up for the paid version of the software so we would be able to include those who do not have a computer or smartphone, and meetings could be held without

a time limit. Security is also superior to the free version.

I would like to note here that we did become aware that some management of all of the online meeting providers have beliefs not in accord with our beliefs on life issues. We decided our best option here was to add a prayer intention at every one of our meetings that their hearts may be changed. Our Savior is above earthly issues and can work in the hearts of the developers. We are persistent in this plea.

All do not feel comfortable using the platform for a variety of reasons, and the times of additional prayer are not always perfect; but many of our fraternity members are attending. We are getting to know each other more deeply as we are meeting more often. What a blessing! Some of us who live in senior housing are unable to be with family and friends, and we can support and encourage each other... to share our tears and to know we are not alone. We are building community through a technology that prior to this time was anathema to most of us.

On Easter Sunday, many of us gathered for prayer, rejoicing through song, scripture readings and prayers of thanksgiving! We shared the fun and hardships of a modified Easter feast, how we were communicating with loved ones, our tears and fears. This was organized by one of our fraternity members who was so inspired, and it was a wonderful time. I believe each one of us who attended was greatly blessed by this celebration, and we will be sharing the experience with our children and grandchildren when we are past the time of pandemic and have settled into our lives once again.

In addition to Zoom, we have been committed to making sure that each member of our fraternity is contacted by phone or letter to encourage and uplift them. We understand some are not comfortable with the technology, and we continue to try to find ways to reach them. It is remarkable that our fraternity has been able to continue to support our ministries financially and to remain an alive and active body during this time of separation. What began as an act of inspired desperation has become a great blessing!