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Dear Friends

As we write we are in the middle of level 5 lockdown. It is not certain when that will be lifted and what will follow. Since March nothing has been certain and we live from day to day wondering what next? Life has been difficult for many and continues to be so. We know that many face Christmas with lots of worry for the future and yet for some life has changed for the better. We are about to celebrate the birth of the one person in our lives who never changes, is always certain. Jesus Emmanuel, God with us. He is the one who will bring us through, heal our wounds, give us strength.

We began last Advent with all the good intentions of making a great preparation for the coming of the Lord. Each morning we found posted on the board an invitation to pray and make sacrifices for the children of the world. Each day we prayed for children in different situations. Our friend Kerrie came on Christmas Eve for the night Mass to play the organ and sing her solo piece O Holy Night as only she can sing it. We had carols before Mass in three languages, Sr Teresita singing in her native Spanish. Our little Chapel was full to overflowing with our usual friends and a Peruvian family joined us, having met Sr Teresita previously. About half way through Advent, one by one we had begun to go down with the flu and the cook on Christmas day declared there wasn't much point when no one had an appetite for dinner! The traditional setting of the Community room for dinner was abandoned and we ate in the refectory. Santa wasn't deterred by the bug and sneaked in to leave his gifts under the Christmas tree. Every year for the past seventy years or more the Legion of Mary have organised a concert for the Sisters on an evening following Christmas. About forty years ago the Cassidy family joined forces with the Legion in providing the concert. Liam Coughlan had organised it for many years up to 2018. During 2019 Liam was ill and died and then coming up to Christmas Mrs Noirin Cassidy fell ill and died. After such long lives they both have many good works gone before them and both would have considered it time to retire to their Heavenly home. We felt it right to cancel the concert this year as Noirin died so close to Christmas but her great family said she would wish it to go ahead. All was set but then the flu took over and it was not prudent to host it as we would spread the germs. So tradition was once again broken and we said - next Christmas. Alas alack!! It seemed the flu went on and on and everyone was so tired for weeks afterwards. We are now wondering if we had a pre virus attack!

By the end of January two of our Sisters were well enough to attend a week long formators course for Carmelites in Dunardagh Blackrock. Sisters from England and Scotland joined us and it was truly beneficial for all. Next session was scheduled for September..... On 10<sup>th</sup> March we had a visit from the 3<sup>rd</sup> year girls of Ursuline Convent school Sligo who were visiting the Mosque next door as part of their Junior Cert

religious studies. Two days later the schools were closed completely for two weeks initially and eventually full lockdown came into effect.

The Bishops issued directives on matters of hygiene and the spread of the virus. Hand gels and sanitisers were the new normal. We stayed open for as long as it was safe to do so and then on 15<sup>th</sup> March we realised that the time had come when it was no longer safe to remain open either for the Sisters or those who attend our morning Mass. We sadly closed our doors and asked our friends not to come to the Chapel. We celebrated Mass on St Patrick's day without a congregation. It wasn't long until full lockdown and we ourselves couldn't have Mass. We turned to the computer and went online for livestreamed Masses from different parishes. We have been all over Ireland in the meantime! The Vatican then issued a directive that the Easter ceremonies were to be celebrated in Cathedrals and Parish churches only. For us that meant no Easter ceremonies and no Paschal candle lit. We went to RTE and joined the Cathedral of Christ the King Mullingar for the ceremonies. They were certainly splendid but without a congregation. How strange. Easter certainly wasn't as it should be.

It started to become evident that the virus was here to stay a while longer than anticipated and initial and ongoing formation courses that had been planned for Carmelites had to be cancelled and meetings began to take place via Zoom. In June Vocations Ireland organised a Zoom conference entitled Christ is alive – the meaning and purpose of vocation today which some of our sisters attended and a further two-week session in September/October for vocation directors which one of our Sisters attended. The Carmelite formators course was limited to one day via Zoom and we plan a few more days in January 2021 via Zoom. Courses and our Assembly for 2021 are booked provisionally.

So, what have we been doing during lockdown? During the first lockdown we were delighted to experience the silence all around us. We have become so used to the traffic and we no longer hear it and think it doesn't exist but when there was no traffic on the road the only sounds were the birds singing. We didn't miss the traffic but we did miss the children's voices from the schools surrounding us.

The birds seemed to enjoy the silence too. George, our resident buzzard had a great time on UCD grounds, having it all to himself. Ella flew in to join him and they came and went all Summer until they brought baby along to train him to fend for himself along the stream running through the fields. Between George and Ella, our cats Tuppence and Abby and the bats at night the mice, voles, squirrels and anything in between have a very difficult life! We never saw so many goldcrests. They gave themselves away with their excited twitterings when they found a new batch of dandelion seeds or were training their newly fledged young. We saw a strange looking bird fly through the woods one day accompanied by a parrot like call. We thought someone had lost a parrot. A few days later however the same bird landed on the lawn. It looked like an exotic pigeon from the front and a magpie from the back. We dashed to the bird book to find it was a jay. When asked the gardener said, oh yes there's a pair of them in the woods.

Early Summer came and with it lots of dry weather and picnics. The grass dried to a crisp brown and we had twelve young cattle and two donkeys on the land. Rain was needed. It came and it stayed. The grass grew and grew and the gardener got great work out of the new lawnmower! The orchard looked as if it wouldn't produce much this year owing to the dry weather early in the season but the late rains swelled the fruits to great sizes. Whether they will keep as long with so much moisture, time will tell.

Last year Ono and Súile our dogs arrived and while Ono wanted to chase and play, Súile thought that cats were for chasing away altogether so poor Tuppence and Abby had to master their jumping and climbing skills. Tuppence and Abby have now made it very clear who are the bosses around here and Súile keeps a

safe distance. As for Seolta and Glen our donkeys they kick their heels in the air and do their own thing whenever they feel like it. When George flew in first about two years ago the crows and magpies made a huge fuss everytime he moved from tree to tree but by now they have accepted that he is one of the neighbours and all live peaceably together.

Being surrounded by UCD and all the schools we are always aware of exam times and pray for all the students. Coming up to June this year we were very aware of the trauma our young people were going through with the uncertainty of whether or not they would in fact take place. We continue to keep all students in our prayers.

On 29<sup>th</sup> June Churches were allowed to open again with limited congregations and lots of restrictions. Parishes had planned for this and put all the necessary safeguards in place. The new Bishop elect of Kilmore Fr Martin Hayes was able to travel to his Cathedral to celebrate Mass but his ordination did not take place until 20<sup>th</sup> September. There was great excitement here as he is from the same parish, Moycarkey, as one of our Sisters!

A wonderful benefactor donated a treadmill and exercise mats and we set up our own gym which is in daily use, sometimes booking is necessary! One of the Sisters has been knitting and crocheting for Community Connect, a charity set up to help mothers with babies who are in financial difficulty.

Jigsaws have become popular and there is regularly one in the process. Two Sisters on their way to bed one night independently stepped in to put a piece in place. They got a bit engrossed and time slipped by. When they realised they had been there longer than expected they mutually decided to call it a night and put out the lights and left the room. The corridor was in darkness and while feeling their way along to the light switch Ono and Súile woke up and thought there were intruders!!! At least we have tested the security system and it was not found wanting! No one has dared to test it since!

During lockdown we have been visiting different parishes for Mass and one Saturday morning we tuned into Mullingar cathedral and heard that deacon Norman Allred's ordination due to take place next day had been postponed until September as his family could not travel from America. In September we tuned in and were privileged to be able to attend his ordination. Sadly, due to the virus his family was still unable to travel.

Last year we had a visit from the year 8 history class from St Kilian's German school next door and this year's class had lots of questions for us on how we live today. Unfortunately, they were unable to visit due to the restrictions so they wrote their questions which showed how interested and engaged they were with their subject – the medieval monasteries of Europe. After we replied they all wrote to thank us. We hope that before the end of the school year they will be able to visit.

We had a retreat with a difference this year. Due to the uncertainty of when we could have our annual Retreat we decided to go online instead. We went to the Shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham where Mgr John Armitage had given a retreat and the recording is available for use. We are very grateful to Mgr Armitage and we derived great benefit from the retreat. We also followed a unit of lectures on the catechism given by Fr. Morgan Whyte in St Michael's Church, Gorey.

As we write, our Carmelite young Sisters are meeting via Zoom for their ongoing formation and interaction. As there are thirteen Sisters participating in the conference, we are sure there will be plenty of life and joy. There were two final professions this year, thanks be to God.

We would like to thank all our many friends and benefactors for their support and concern for our welfare during the year. We thank you for your letters, emails and phone calls. We really do appreciate them. Our Chapel remains closed to the public and visitors are restricted so we do miss the physical presence of all who normally visit. During the pandemic we have received many letters, emails and phone calls from people seeking the support of our prayers as they struggle to cope with the restrictions. Life has certainly changed both for the young and the not so young and while the challenges facing each generation are different, they are still challenging. We keep all in our prayers. Many of our friends have had the virus and sadly some have died, we remember especially Fr Paddy Byrne S.M. who for many years walked over on Tuesday afternoons to give us a Scripture lecture and also took his turn celebrating Mass as one of our Chaplains. Many more of our friends and relatives have died from non-covid illness this year. Not being able to have a proper funeral has caused so much pain and we attended funerals of our Carmelite Sisters and Brothers and some of our friends and relatives via Zoom when it was possible. We remember in our prayers all who have died this year and this month we have our remembrance tree with the names of all our deceased relatives, friends and benefactors in the sanctuary. We pray for all those named on the tree each time we go to the Chapel.

Be assured of our continued prayers for all of you and we wish you a very blessed Christmas and a healthy and peaceful 2021.