

THE Aquinas Way

Greetings, Theological Reflections and Spiritual Resources
during the COVID-19 Pandemic

*"The only way truly through such a
challenge is in the direction of Love."*

DAVE WENZEL

Bulletin IV - April 17, 2020

Greetings from Dave Wenzel, Class of 2005
Board Chair, Aquinas Institute of Theology
Principal, Edward Jones

April 17, 2020
Octave of Easter

Dear Members of the Aquinas

Community,

My full time studies at Aquinas Institute began 20 years ago this fall. Though I was considering many professional paths at the time, that brief theological immersion ended up being only a sabbatical from a traditional business career (though my friends have often heard me say that it remains the richest intellectual and spiritual experience of my adult life). Still, theology has crept into my business experiences in interesting ways, and that element of my internally-posted biography remains the thing that I am most often asked about by new colleagues.





Recently, in my strategic planning role at Edward Jones, I had the opportunity to share one of the enduring themes I took away from my time at Aquinas. After a strategy debate in early February with our senior executives (before Covid-19 was in our vocabulary), one of them commented that the strategic dilemma seemed analogous to a theological concept. I seconded the thought, explaining that the challenge we faced required the same discipline that I had learned at Aquinas – the ability to hold up and honor simultaneously two ideas that, on their face, seem mutually exclusive. In my experience at Aquinas, I found time and again that practicing this discipline, rather than following my natural inclination to select one option to the exclusion of the other, allowed time for the Spirit to work, often bringing new understandings of both.

It occurs to me that the current pandemic has generated another analogous problem. It would seem we are faced with two options that feel increasingly mutually exclusive – protect the population, and especially those most vulnerable from the virus, or avoid a potentially catastrophic economic recession which may also bring massive human suffering. Fortunately, few are endorsing the most extreme version of either of these options (demonstrating our broad human capacity for a theological discipline), but the nuances of this debate are not my reason for raising the subject.

In that February meeting our firm's Managing Partner (our CEO) surprised me by picking up on my theological analogy. "I agree that we must hold these contrary ideas in suspense," she said, "and the only thing that makes that possible is Love."

Aside from the heartwarming surprise of hearing that sentiment expressed by the leader of a Fortune 500 enterprise, it also seemed to me that she had boiled down much of what was troubling about the current tenor in our culture. But here, just two months later, it seems her comment is equally or even more pertinent to our journey through this present challenge. We do not know today how we will navigate between the Scylla of viral spread and the Charybdis of global depression, but it is safe to say that we can only succeed if we are guided by Love. Perhaps this revelation is why our Creator fashioned a world subject to a scourge like Coronavirus. The only way truly through such a challenge is in the direction of Love.

On behalf of the Aquinas community, I pray that you and your loved ones are brought safely through this crisis and that you find new reservoirs of love along the way.

Sincerely,

Dave Wenzel

Chair, Aquinas Institute of Theology Board of Trustees

Feeling antsy? Morose?

Kathleen Norris offers tips to cope with acedia

April 7, 2020

by Peter Feuerherd

"Most people wouldn't know the word," acknowledged Norris.

"It isn't just depression. It isn't just boredom. It's a lot of things."

A world thrust into monastic life is now forced to know what the ancient monks recognized as a spiritual virus.



world often considered exotic and medieval. But by the last day of March, on the phone from her home in Honolulu, she discussed how that world is no longer a strange one.

"Millions of Americans are forced to be hermits and live a monastic life," she told NCR. And, during this era of the coronavirus and isolation, many will face what the desert monks of the fourth century described as *acedia*. For the ancient monks, *acedia* was defined as a sense of restlessness, spiritual unease and an urge to escape the harsh routines of monastic life. It was considered a deadly sin, numbing those who succumb to it to access to God's love and the fruits of the spiritual life.

These days, Norris said, much of the world can look toward those ancient monks for inspiration. They survived amid a bleak landscape, sometimes falling into what was described as a noonday torpor, a warning sign for *acedia*. Norris has a renewed appreciation for what those early monks endured.

"They couldn't stream movies on Netflix," she said. "They were on the frontlines." The word was prevalent in the fourth century and re-emerged as a concept during the 14th-century European plagues. "It is just as opportunist as a virus. It will start to show up."

Norris immersed herself in the history of monasticism and wrote *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* in 2008. The book came out during the beginning of the Great Recession. Interest in the book was high. Her tour audiences for that work exceeded those of her other spirituality books. When crisis hits the wider society, *acedia* is sure to increase.

In today's crisis, the experience of isolation can aggravate feelings of *acedia*, often confused with the more modern description of depression. But there are differences, she said. In some ways, the crisis has not been a large hardship for her, she emphasized. Norris, a widow for 17 years, is used to living alone. She still takes walks through her hilly neighborhood but misses her gym and swimming time.

Her spirituality expertise helps. "I recognize *acedia* when it does turn up. Being forced to stay still is a breeding ground," she said. *Acedia* is a lot like the pandemic: It spreads rapidly through confined quarters.

For some, being forced to spend long hours with family can be hellish. When *acedia* strikes, it creates an urge to lash out. "It's the feeling of being totally bored and totally restless. It's a horrible combination," said Norris.

Many will now be forced, because of the lack of diversion, to experience *acedia*, perhaps in a way they haven't before. Norris' book on the subject wrestled with its definition. It is in some ways known by what it is not.

It is not clinical depression. But it is accompanied by sadness, which Norris said comes toward the end of a bout with *acedia*. She knows the difference, having experienced times of depression. The medieval monks often cited Psalm 91, to describe the feeling of being afflicted by a noonday demon. But it can strike any time, said Norris.

So how do hundreds of millions of newly minted, if reluctant, "monks" cope with the experience? Norris notes that parents of young children have a different experience, engaged in the work of keeping children busy and learning. Those are the demands that go beyond adult careful planning. For those who are not caring for children, it helps to establish a daily routine. Monastic living is established with a routine, for a good reason. Times are set aside for morning prayer, mealtimes, afternoon prayer and work.

It's like a scaffolding, akin to the way buildings are kept together, much like our spiritual and emotional lives, she said.

(continued)

Kathleen Norris offers tips to cope with acedia *(continued)*

Her other bits of advice: Take a shower and wash your hair every day. Little items of grooming, when neglected, can create a "feeling of 'Why bother?'" "Take a walk, keeping in mind social distance concerns. There's nothing wrong with simple pleasures as well. "I provide myself with enough chocolate to keep going," said Norris.

When the demons lurk, Norris suggests prayerful readings of the psalms. Quoting Peter Gomes, the late Harvard chaplain who wrote spirituality bestsellers, the psalms are unsurpassed as spiritual buttresses. They can also be shocking in their reflection of brutal human feeling. Sometimes they don't connect to a particular experience. Norris suggests to keep reading "until you find a psalm that speaks to your mind. Every human emotion is there."

The psalms speak to varied human emotions, including anger. Psalm 137 even contemplates the smashing of foreign babies of those who enslaved God's people. That same Psalm 137 talks about the Israelites singing their sacred songs in an alien land, bound to captivity in Babylon. The psalm, she said, "is really useful because it shows what we do to people. It shows us that kind of resentment. It's not alien to the human experience."

Spirituality can suffuse the most mundane of tasks for those forced to stay home and live as hermits. Norris recites the Lord's Prayer while washing her hands. She also suggests listening to music, really listening, not as background noise for other activities. Actor Patrick Stewart's Shakespeare recitations is another hobby.

She suggests taking opportunities not to be totally self-absorbed. She makes a point of thanking her postal deliverer for working during the pandemic. She connects via social media to her 4- and 6-year-old nieces, who tell her jokes, often bad ones. Such little interactions are a way of moving out

of self-absorption.

Norris suspects the pandemic will not be an easy time as a vibrant society learns the art of quiet and reflection. It will be a forced lesson in many cases. "There is no place to run to. That is one of the hardest things for us." The desert monks were aware of the temptation to flee. When one of their number would flee to Alexandria for some urban pleasures, the older monks would counsel that the community welcome him back. They recognized the temptation.

She worries about the isolation of older people, especially those in nursing homes, in the current crisis. Many are forced to eat their meals alone, in their rooms. That is a debilitating experience, said Norris, who notes that eating meals outside the community was considered punishment in monastic life.

Acedia, familiar to the ancient Christians, can feel like a nebulous concept to their modern counterparts. But it's the kind of thing recognized when it happens. "Most people wouldn't know the word," acknowledged Norris. "It isn't just depression. It isn't just boredom. It's a lot of things." A world thrust into monastic life is now forced to know what the ancient monks recognized as a spiritual virus.

[Peter Feuerherd is NCR news editor.]

A version of this story appeared in the April 17-30, 2020 print issue under the headline: Feeling antsy? Morose? Kathleen Norris offers tips to cope with acedia. From ncronline.org

SPIRITUAL RESOURCES

The Word

The Word offers [daily homilies](#) from the Order of Preachers.

Easter Season Resources

Resources for families to celebrate the Easter season are available through [Loyola Press](#).

COVID-19 Resources from The Catholic Health Association

The Catholic Health Association of the United States has created a [list of COVID-19 resources](#) which provide information regarding bioethics, palliative care, pastoral care, spiritual resources, and a wealth of credible resources for anyone with questions about this pandemic.

COVID-19 Resources from The US Conference of Catholic Bishops

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops provides a [page of resources](#) for Catholic at home during the COVID-19 crisis.

Free Formational Events

The National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministers has a [collection of one-hour formational events](#) presented free to ministry leaders and volunteers as part of their mission to support and strengthen those who accompany young people as they encounter and follow Jesus Christ.

Family Resources to Pray Together from Home

The United States Association of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd provides a [wonderful page](#) of resources for parents and families to pray together from home.

Friarly

This project is a [collaborative effort](#) of the Dominican Student Brothers of St. Dominic Priory in St. Louis, Missouri. The COVID-19 resource page offers a number prayer and liturgical resources including the daily preaching by one of the Dominican friars.

Today's Word of Hope

[Daily reflections](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis offered by Fr. James Marchionda, OP, Provincial of the Dominican Central Province of St. Albert the Great.

Reflections from Fr. Cristobal Torres, OP

Fr. Cristobal a graduate of Aquinas Institute of Theology and a friar from the Southern Province of St. Martin de Porres. He serves as University Chaplain at Barry University and offers a short daily reflection on the [Barry University Campus Ministry Facebook page](#).

CHURCH: Catholics Helping Us Reach Catholics at Home

This is a [public Facebook group](#) facilitated by Firebrand+ (created by Aquinas graduate, Jared Bryson, and his business partner, Katie O'Brien Pesha). The CHURCH group is a portal to see how people are sharing our faith in unique ways during this unprecedented time.

“Spirituality for a Time of Scarcity” by Fr. Charles Bouchard, OP

Former Aquinas Institute President, Charles Bouchard, OP is the senior director of theology and ethics at the Catholic Health Association of the United States. This

article, “Spirituality for a Time of Scarcity” was recently published in the National Catholic Reporter.

From Liturgical Press

Complimentary access to the April digital editions of ‘Give Us This Day,’ a daily prayer resource with scripture reflections, inspiration from the lives of saints, and simplified morning and evening prayer.

Please share your comments and suggestions with
Erin Hammond at registrar@ai.edu

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. ROMANS 8:38-39

