

Fr Andy's latest Reflection
A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A PRIEST

The last twelve months have proved to be quite a testing time in my own life as well as for the whole world. During the Lent and Easter of 2019 I was not in the greatest of health, but put it down to the stresses and strains that come, especially with the demands and commitments that Holy Week brings. I was still not on great form at the Lyric theatre when we had the marvellous celebration of my 40 years of priesthood with my family and parishioners from St Joseph's and St Mary Magdalene's and many other friends from all over the place. Yet, just a week later I got up on a Monday morning, the 22nd July and I knew in my heart and bones that I could not carry on as I was. I could not face going to work at the hospital the next day and so I rang in sick, the first time I have had time off work in forty years. The next day John Cape came to visit me and it wasn't long before he discerned that I was not fit to carry on working as a priest in the parish and pleaded with me to let him contact the Bishop and the Vicar General so that I can be relieved of my duties and so the process of finding priestly cover for the weekend Masses began.

At this time I could not think straight, nor could I make any decisions; I did not know what to do and I just felt physically and mentally exhausted. It wasn't long after this that it was suggested to me that I move out of the parish house and find alternative accommodation elsewhere. At first, I moved into St Peter-In-Chain's parish in Doncaster with my good friend Father Darren. However, his kindness could not control the busyness of a town centre parish and I felt the continuous activity in and around the house difficult to cope with. Eventually a small house within the parish boundaries was found for me to rent.

After a badly needed operation on my oesophagus I was gently cared for by Monica Carroll, who kindly looked after my every need while I recuperated at her house before going into the rented accommodation. Though the house was comfortable and relatively quiet I felt somewhat exiled from my own home to live in isolation. However, within this solitary existence I discovered through emails, telephone calls, texted messages and get-well cards in the post, that I was so blessed, especially when people came to visit me (Andy's Angels as well as friends and family). This overwhelming love that descended on me was truly a divine gift and gave me strength and hope, even when I was physically cut off from what I sincerely loved and where I really belonged.

The prayer of St Teresa of Avila was constantly on my lips:

"Let nothing disturb you; let nothing upset you. Everything changes. God alone is unchanging. With patience all things are possible. Whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone is enough."

It was a joy to return to the parish in early November and to be able to spend Christmas with everyone I have come to know and love so very much. I began to feel stronger and healthier, which I had not felt like in years. Who would have thought that a few months later we would all become isolated, even in our own homes? I can't help feeling that there is an amazing connection between what happened to me last summer and what is happening during this coronavirus pandemic.

One thing I established during my time in my rented accommodation was going for long walks. I made sure that I went out every day. Since the pandemic I have managed to get out for a walk every day. It has been especially beneficial during the lovely weather we have been having recently. My hospital work continues with telephone conversations from home, though I have had to visit some hospital wards, when there was a need and to the hospice for end of life care. There have been relatively few deaths in the parishes recently

and I have so far only officiated at one funeral, which was a graveside burial last week. I have been contacting many parishioners by telephone in St Joseph's and Blessed William Richardson, particularly the sick and those who are isolated and living on their own. I know there are over eighty people on the parish WhatsApp and the bulletin goes out on the web every week and for those who do not have the technology there are those who print copies off and deliver them to those who want it. Marvellous! I thank you all for what you do and thank God that we have been so blessed.

It is this connectedness with one another that has made this lockdown not only tolerable but enriching. In my rented accommodation I wasn't able to celebrate Mass, though I continued to pray daily the Divine Office and my hour meditation. Like a good Catholic I went to Church on a Sunday to one of the local parishes, trying my best to keep a low profile. Though I certainly did not want this kind of existence going on for too long, I felt a deep connection with everyone and at times experiencing an overwhelming sense of love and support.

Since the advent of the coronavirus pandemic I have started celebrating daily Mass in my own home and I pray for everyone in the parishes, for those afflicted with the coronavirus, for those who have died from it and the bereaved and for those who are looking after the sick. The Masses in my home are no longer solitary and private forms of prayer, but have become launching pads of divine energy that reach out to everyone, everywhere – that's the power of the Easter Eucharist. And so now, even with the church doors closed, there is a wonderful bond of love that has been unleashed, which has spread more powerfully than any coronavirus could. This is the love that will ultimately defeat this virus, because it is the love that we all share in Christ Jesus our Lord, who overcame even death itself. We will rise to a new and more glorious life – and it begins now!

“God, our Father, thank you for living and loving in us and through us. May all that we do flow from our deep connection with you and all of life. Help us become a community that vulnerably shares each other's burdens and joys. Listen to our heart's longings for the healing of the world, knowing you are hearing us better than we are speaking; we offer these prayers through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

PS A man walks into a hardware store to buy a chainsaw. The salesman shows him the top of the range model. “With this,” says the salesman, “you will be able to cut down 20 trees a day.” “Wow”, the man says, “I'll take it.” A few days later the man goes back to the hardware store and tells the salesman, “You told me that his chainsaw would cut down 20 trees a day”. “That's right”, says the salesman. “Well”, says the man, “I took it out on the first day and barely managed to cut down two very thin trees. The next day I tried again. I got up at 4am and worked hard as I could all day and still only managed to cut through 3 very thin trees.” “Oh dear”, says the salesman, “it sounds like this chainsaw may be defective in some way. Let's give it a try and see what's wrong.” The salesman then plugs the chainsaw in and starts it up at which point the man says, “What's that noise?”