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Withdrawing from the lonely crowd

10 ways to make productive use of home quarantine time.

Excerpts from the March 20, 2020 column of Dr. Bernardo Villegas in the Manila Bulletin (Philippines)

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The social distancing necessary to avoid the rapid spreading of the Corona virus may have some salutary side effects on Philippine society. For the next few weeks, we are told to avoid crowds and large

gatherings. As much as possible, we should stay at home with our loved ones. If we have to go out, we are advised to be always at least two meters away from the nearest human being. Those countries that immediately implemented social distancing measures from the first sign of the appearance of COVID-19 have succeeded in limiting the spread of the disease.

This enforced isolation may compensate for the many times that parents and other members of the family could have sacrificed quality and quantity time with their loved ones in pursuit of more wealth, fame or glory. Having more time to reflect and pray in some kind of a self-directed spiritual retreat may bring back the inner-directedness that is strongly based on religious beliefs and convictions. This could also be time to get closer to friends we have neglected because of too much time

spent on work or recreation. Our social distancing from anonymous people we meet in crowds could enable us to have closer relationships with the people who matter most in our lives, our family and our close friends.

In this regard, I would like to share with my readers some tips for making most productive use of the forced enclosure in our homes that the lock down or quarantine due to the COVID-19 virus may entail. They are adaptations of pieces of advice given by St. Josemaria Escriva, Founder of Opus Dei, when he and the first members of this Personal Prelature had to hide in very cramped quarters for months on end during the Spanish Civil War (1936 to 1939) when they were residing in the zone controlled by the Communists who were hunting down priests and practising Catholics. Though the circumstances differ, the uncertainty

and forced inactivity are similar and may also, as in the case of St. Josemaria and his companions, lead to discouragement, irritation, anxiety and fear.

The first advice is to **be optimistic**. For a Christian, there is a strong belief that everything works unto good for those who love God. God is our good Father who permits trials and tribulations, like the one we are experiencing with the Corona virus, always for our ultimate benefit. We can be sure that, although we cannot see it now, there will be some good that will come out of this crisis. That is why we should face this troubling situation with supernatural sense, good humour and hope.

Second, we must **keep a schedule** so that we can make good use of the hours of the day. We can fit into each of the two weeks of enforced enclosure some time for advancing

our professional knowledge, intensifying our personal relations with God through prayer and spiritual reading (especially the Holy Gospel), bonding with members of our family and intimate friends, and doing some physical exercise.

Third, we should **avoid like the plague the temptation to “kill time”**, especially with the aimless and excessive use of the internet and other digital tools.

Fourth, we may use part of the time in our hands to **learn something new**, whether related to our professional growth or our cultural enrichment in general. This may be the opportunity for us to take that online course we have been considering for some time but never had the time to pursue. For professors, for example, this time may be an opportunity to learn the ins and outs of giving courses online

through such applications as Canvass. Or we may start learning a new language, a new recipe, or a new musical piece or song.

Fifth, those who already have a hobby or two should be happy that they can **spend more time on their interest**. For example, I am very glad to be able to spend more time than usual on gardening, one of my hobbies. Others spend more time on some physical exercise that can be done at home, reading of some fiction or non-fiction book, doing some creative writing, etc.

Sixth, these moments of forced inactivity may be spent partly in some kind of spiritual retreat during which we can **spend more time in conversation with God**, using as guides the abundant materials we can get from the internet such as podcasts from such famous personalities as Bishop Robert Barron,

Scott Hahn, or the late famous preacher Bishop Fulton Sheen. Time for more prayer and spiritual reading can lead to great interior growth. God is always with us and never leaves us alone.

Seventh, there are always members of our family, relatives and friends whom we might have not talked to for some time because of our busy schedule. This time we may be able to talk to them at greater length face-to-face, by phone or video. Skype or even such application like Zoom may come in handy to **be in close touch with one or more persons we have neglected** in the past.

Eighth, **be a support for those around you**; during these trying moments, fear and irritation are great temptations. We have to look after the needs of the most vulnerable, especially among the older ones who are most susceptible

to the virus. On the other end of the age spectrum, we may have to “waste” time helping to organise all types of activities that can distract children who can be the most restive during idle moments.

Ninth, **keep calm**. Always remind people that the glass is half-full by not adding to the negativity through constant complaining and carping. There are always good things and good persons around us even in the most bothersome moments. For example, I am very thankful to friends of mine who send me Viber stories about charitable acts of people in supermarkets who come to the aid of needy individuals by paying for their grocery bills or others who come to the rescue of some Chinese-looking individuals who are harassed by some racists.

Finally, **be quick to ask for pardon**. Living under quarantine especially

in closed quarters can be complicated. Frictions and misunderstandings can easily arise. Always have a ready apology on your lips.

Let me end by quoting a letter written by the third successor St. Josemaria Escriva, Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, the present Prelate of Opus Dei: *“Let us be especially grateful to the health personnel who during these days are serving with a generous spirit of sacrifice. Let us be especially attentive to them, and try to support and encourage them in their work... And especially, let us pray so that this period too may be an opportunity for us to draw closer to Our Lord being ‘sowers of peace and joy’ to those around us.”*

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