

On the spirituality of quarantine

How can we be “witnesses to the ends of the earth” right now? I have found some help from St. Benedict and St. Gregory.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [June 3, 2020](#) issue



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I am still trying to figure out the spirituality of staying home. When a highly communicable virus is spreading among us, the most loving way to treat our neighbor is through physical distance. And this doesn't stop the work of the church. I am so grateful to the pastoral leaders on our seminary campus who have found a way to continue chapel services online, offer pastoral counseling over the phone, and mobilize a pastoral care team to check on students. Across the country, pastors are delivering sermons online and hosting digital worship services from their living rooms.

All of that is faithful spirituality. But how do we best fulfill our mission to be Christ's "witnesses to the ends of the earth" by cloistering ourselves at home?

I have found help with this question by remembering the contributions of St. Benedict and St. Gregory. This is not the first time in human history that we have faced widespread disease that leads us to prayer.

The sixth century was a long, horrible time in Rome. The city had long fallen to a succession of invading armies. The economy was in shambles. And the Plague of Justinian was ravaging the city. People were frightened for so many reasons. But it was also the century that gave us St. Benedict, who wrote the rule that still guides many monastic houses to this day. This rule included a daily rhythm of prayer, work, and the singing of the psalter—including the psalms of lament. Down through the centuries, and the succession of plagues to follow, the people took comfort in knowing that the monks were voicing their laments and petitions to God.

The sixth century also gave us St. Gregory, who reluctantly left one of those monastic houses to become the pope. Not only did Gregory take over the ecclesiastical leadership of the church, but he also sold church property in order to feed the people of Rome. He called himself “a contemplative condemned to action.” But his “action” entailed a careful balance of caring for the poor and developing a theology of prayer for the monasteries. In other words, Gregory saw cloistered prayer as an active way of caring for the world.

The monks weren’t trying to escape the problems of the world. They brought society’s pathos with them into the monasteries in order to devote themselves to a life of prayer for the world’s salvation. Gregory wrote that our prayers begin with humility over the “agitation of the world” we cannot resolve. Staying in prayer, he claimed, leads us into contemplation, which then leads to visions of the goodness of God. And this vision of the Savior with us leaves us with humility in gratitude. So the journey of prayer is from humility in agitation to humility in gratitude.

These days the agitation of the world is ever present before us. People are being hurt physically, emotionally, and economically by this virus. We’re separated from each other, and our virtual communications and classrooms are only virtually satisfying. Even our leaders have more questions than answers, and it is not clear how long this will last. This has come upon us so fast that every week we become nostalgic for the previous one. Yes, we have been humbled by this virus. And Gregory would say that is a call to prayer for the world.

To be clear, his point is not that we might as well pray if we have nothing else to do while stuck at home. His ministry is a testimony that our prayers in humility are also a means of activism. We join 1,500 years of cloistered monks who brought the world's laments before God in search of a vision of salvation. It's hard to think of anything more effective than placing a sick world back in the arms of its creator and healer.

Through prayer, we demonstrate our resolve not to flee the dangerous virus and hide at home, but to turn those homes into monastic cells that actively call for God's salvation to find its way to the ends of the earth. These are prayers not just for our family, our community, and our neighbors but for the world. The whole world needs our prayers for holy intervention today.

If we stay in prayer long enough, Gregory promises, we will find the vision we need that today is not the end of the story because a savior is still at work. The God who was so clearly faithful in our past is going to be faithful today, tomorrow, and through eternity. And then we are led to humility in gratitude that God is with us.

But remember, the monks engaged in this journey through prayer as a daily routine. Don't be dismayed if after getting a glimpse of hope you find yourself again humbled in agitation. That's a daily invitation to prayer. And along the way you will keep seeing ways God is at work today, which leads back again to humility in gratitude.

I am grateful for glimpses of God's salvation through the heroism of health-care workers who tirelessly put themselves in harm's way by caring for the sick. I'm grateful for the leaders around the world who have made hard choices to put human lives above tax revenues and public convenience. And I'm so grateful to the faculty, students, and staff of our seminary who are doing whatever it takes to ensure we are still a high-functioning, loving community of faith and scholarship.

And when anxiety and agitation come knocking the next day, we have no way to find the perfect love that casts out fear apart from prayer. It's humbling.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Benedict, Gregory, and me."