

Reflections on the lockdown from a former Carthusian monk

I speak from the experience of 20 years lived in solitude in the Carthusian Order, considered the most rigorous religious order for solitude in the Western church. I know about solitude, its traps and its dangers. As a result, I am worried about the effects that the lockdown may be having on people who have been forced into solitude and have not been initiated into it or trained by people who know its dangers and how to face them. After several weeks, some may be coping well, but a growing number of others are not.

More than nine centuries of experience of the Carthusian Order has shown that most people cannot maintain their mental health without at least two personal human contacts a day (even those who live it well and have personally chosen that kind of life). My concern is that a lot of people may not have this minimum now. Even with radio and television, the post and sometimes the internet, the effects can be devastating.

Because of my personal experience and training, as soon as this lockdown started, we organised in our parish a rota system whereby every vulnerable person that we know receives one phone call a day from a different person. Some ask to have only one call a week (mostly that is couples living together) and that is respected. Most, however, are happy and grateful. When this call from the church is complemented by another from a family member we get to the necessary minimum.

One of the main dangers is that without human contact people can lose perspective on their normal fears and anxieties which can then become amplified and take over their lives. Solitude can enable thoughts about conflicts and emotions from the past, especially those that had not been addressed at the time, to surface from our subconscious. This surfacing may manifest itself in unaccountable and uncontrollable mood swings, for example, or feelings of depression. Such surfacing can be helpful and can teach us much when handled well with the help of a spiritual guide or friend; otherwise it can be harmful.

Memory loss (particularly with names, dates, places etc.) is common in solitude and is less dangerous. The person can be reassured that it is 'normal' in their present condition. But signs of confusion should be noted and not dismissed. They may simply be due to tiredness, but they may be a sign that something is happening at the level of the unconscious which is dangerous. I have seen people go into psychological meltdown quickly because others downplayed such signs. This is more dangerous at the beginning of a life in solitude, and the incidents I saw happened during the first few months.

The biggest danger with solitude is that psychological weaknesses are reinforced and past emotional wounds re-open. These may have been kept in check with daily routines and regular visits or outings, even simply for shopping. Now, however, some who are deprived of these may find themselves in real trouble. Weekly checking may not be enough, especially with lockdown potentially continuing for the foreseeable future for many, especially older, people. But the danger is there for younger people too.

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