

Dear Confreres,

Greetings from Villa Santa Maria in Rome.

We have been receiving news from the far south of winter rain, winds and cold. Meanwhile here in Rome it is mid-summer we are certainly feeling the heat. This summer time will mean a few weeks of less communication from us here in Rome.

This is a good time then to thank all those who have worked together to produce the Marist Covid-19 Newsletter over recent months. We thank the editors in our secretarial team, the translators, and all the contributors from far and wide in our Marist world. These have been difficult months – and the crisis is far from over yet – but it has helped that we have stayed united as one Society as we have shared the stories

This edition of the Marist Covid-19 Newsletter has stories from two of our more remote missions in Europe – one from Norway and one from Russia. We can also read in this newsletter the story of responding to the virus in the light of another potentially even more dire crisis. It is encouraging to read that our confreres in the Pacific and in our Marist formation community there are working to develop a more integrated ecological Marist life-style, learning from the Corona virus situation.

Several leading governments in the world are determined to re-build their economies and their societies post-virus on sound ecological principles. This is hopeful as long as the aspirations are realized.

The Church too is giving us a challenging programme to build our lives on the principles of *Laudato Si'*.¹ Our Marist Ecological Commission, working mainly from our Provinces in Oceania and New Zealand, is trying to help us all to work with greater dedication in this direction.

The virus is teaching us the fragility of our sacred world. Let's be working together with all in our Church and in our world to live more simple, grounded lives that respect and reflect the beauty of God's creation.

Our 2017 Chapter says: *"Mary, the mother the New Creation, calls us to nurture life in all its forms, especially among our most vulnerable brothers and sisters and in our damaged planet"*. (No.5).

Fraternally,

John Larsen s.m.

⁽¹⁾ <http://www.humandevlopment.va/content/dam/sviluppoumano/documenti/LAUDATO%20SI'%20Special%20Anniversary%20Year%20Plans.pdf>

Marist College Suva, Fiji (1) from Donato Kivi



Fiji confirmed its first case of Covid-19 on the 19th of March. On the same day, the government announced a complete lockdown to the place the victim resided. After more cases were found, other areas went into lockdown until the whole of Fiji was in lockdown.

PRS continued classes on Zoom. Zoom proved to be a useful tool. Perhaps it was the best and possibly only way not to bring everything to a complete stop. Students and lecturers found it quite a nerve-racking experience at the beginning. A few students have expressed the desire to continue with zoom while others are living in hope to return to the classroom setting.

Cyclone Harold made landfall in Fiji, as category four, on the night of 7th and 8th of April. Over 1,700 evacuees were sheltered in 61 evacuation centres. There were 2,740 that were completely or partially damaged. Luckily no deaths were reported.

At Marist College, we only experienced strong winds. We had to save our vegetable seedlings - sheltering them inside our dining room.

Restrictions have made us do more on our backyard gardening. It was a blessing in disguise that the lockdown and restrictions did make us realize that we have to be more ecologically sustainable. We noticed that the price of the vegetables and produce at the local market went up very fast. Many local farmers were restricted or were not able to cross borders to sell their crops.



On the same day when the first Covid19 case was reported in Fiji, we saw the arrival of our 4 propaedeutic candidates. They were joined by the other three the following day. They were a vibrant group of 7 young men from various walks of life. We welcomed them and within a week things became more critical and restrictions were announced on social distance especially with gathering in big groups. So we had to send our seven propaedeutic students home.

Marist College Suva, Fiji (2)

The Pacific Regional Seminary has set its dateline on entrance exam for 2021, so all the seven of them have set their English exam. As restrictions are easing up, we hope to welcome them back soon.

The first term ended with classes on Zoom. Everyone somehow needed breathing space but, there were still restrictions on the movement of people around. We were very fortunate to have the Ecological centre in Dawasamu which was a safe place to escape. Most of the students went there for a week. They spent their time working at the Ecological Centre building and putting up a foundation for a 10,000 L water tank and the extension work on the building. A few stayed back at Marist College and cleaned up the Compound. The second semester began well, and we are in our fifth week into the term.



which led to a day of recollection that kept us thinking and reflecting on a further possible way to care for our mother earth.

On Sunday 21st June more restrictions were lifted after sixty-four days since the first case was confirmed. In the midst of all this COVID 19, our community has been searching and developing ways of becoming more ecologically friendly and sustaining our environment. We welcomed with hopeful signs the news about the “Roll Out Plan” on Laudato SI platform that was mapped up by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. We had a reflection day recently

Like most other European countries, the corona-crisis hit Norway in the middle of March. Virtually overnight, all public events were cancelled. The Catholic churches remained open, but only for private prayer. Several parishes transmitted their services on the internet. As the Norwegian society is highly digitalised, most people could be reached by these means. (And since most Catholics are foreigners, many would use these in their contact with their families, too.) Thus, pastoral work was mainly restricted to telephone and social media. The most important event in youth ministry, the annual Easter camps, had to be cancelled. Instead, some staff and volunteers managed to arrange a virtual camp by giving several daily inputs during Holy Week.



In our small Marist community, we stayed at home, apart from a weekly shopping trip and some outdoor activities like cycling. We had our community prayer and celebrated daily mass in a never-known regularity, but without the people we normally would meet. When we received the Easter candle from one of the youth camps, I prepared it this year and placed it in the camp chapel after Pentecost. Unfortunately, we were not able to have our weekly meeting with our fourth confrere, as the community, to which he serves, was under the restrictions for health care institutions.

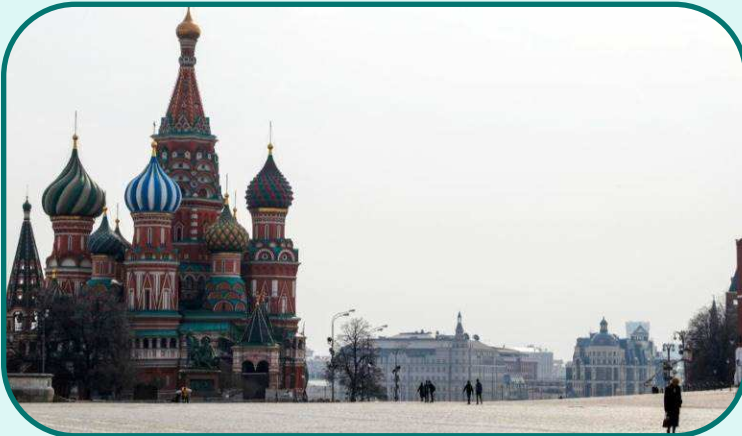
When churches could open again in May, though with restrictions, the diocese had developed an online registration tool. This is important in a diaspora situation

where people often would travel a long way to church, so that they would not be turned away. Initially, the number of masses was increased to allow as many people as possible to attend church. At present, up to 200 people can gather in public places (like churches), provided they can keep one meter's distance, but they still have to register. It is a strange feeling to distribute communion with gloves or a tong, but it is a reminder that we always have to adapt to the situation.

Unlike many other youth organisations, which had to cancel their big summer events, ours went ahead with its plans to arrange summer camps. As we, besides other precautions, do not use the full capacity of the sites. Most of the six camps are fully booked, and about 240 children and youths will be able to spend a week with peers in a Catholic environment. (I have to keep up my excitement as my turn will be next week.)

Most of public life is now nearly back to normal. The biggest impact for ordinary people seems to be, at the moment, travel restrictions to countries south of Denmark will not be lifted before July 15th, which is already half-way through the summer holidays.

MOSCOW (1) from Michael Ryan



Hi from the center of Moscow a kilometer from Red Square. Sure, the virus is still here, but so are we.

All things change, even a pandemic. The restrictions are now somewhat lifted. The parks and the city's nature reserves and many establishments are open again with the common rules and advice for the people.

A week ago, I thanked the Mother Theresa Sisters for their kindness and care for me during the last three months of lockdown, and took my leave to return to the city center. It was "Bye for the while" to the Sisters' community and to the small community of vulnerable men and women that the Sisters have cared for over thirty years.

During those months, starting in the early Russian spring, when we couldn't go outside our yard among the trees, the squirrels and birds came from the forest, across the fence, to visit us. Blue tits, great tits, wagtails, fieldfares, chaffinches, crows, starlings, swifts and more.

God has been good. The few people who went to hospital, or who fought it out at home or in university hostels are breathing easier again.

And Our Lady of Hope Parish? sure, we're an unusual parish...! We have the people and the enthusiasm of those who own nothing but their faith in Jesus and the brotherhood that we share.

In the capital of perhaps 18 million people, we are a foreign minority among the Catholics who are themselves a minority in Russia. In the best of times, we keep our spirits high. We meet and pray and organize in borrowed premises. We are Africans, Asians and Americans, with some Arabs and Europeans, naturalized Russians and African Russians. One of our joys is our three choirs, French and English and Filipino. Another joy are our children – three were born during the lockdown, adding to one set of triplets, twins, other children, single mothers and couples with children, many struggling, in ordinary days, to make ends meet in the metropolis. Some are in the grey areas of "insufficient documentation".

What struck me in my isolation, which I shared with parishioners, was how resilient our community is. Inside the parish, networks and groups have been established over the years. Whatsapp, Viber, Facebook and other networks keep people linked, even in different continents.



Out of the blue, one day came a surprise: -The French choir put together another video, this time, an offering to help “keep spirits high”. We sent it across the networks to as many people as we are in touch with. Even the Moscow archdiocese were moved to put it on their website, with a Russian translation from the French. You can watch it through this [link](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jmoax21ywQw&feature=youtu.be):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jmoax21ywQw&feature=youtu.be>

I was locked down with just my phone in the Sisters’ community in strict quarantine and initiatives bounced up with enthusiasm, by parishioners making calls and connections. The Igbo brotherhood provided food parcels and distributed them to their needy members; they identified over ninety and delivered basic groceries and chicken.

With permission from the Moscow government, the Sisters provided food parcels to six needy families of the parish living outside the city boundaries. They carefully delivered them at the curbside near their towerblocks. More parishioners collected money which we sent through phone to phone distribution to twenty-six single mothers and families with no income.

Now I’m back in my apartment in the diplomatic compound and I am picking up pieces of office and parish life and I am moving on, from a distance, with office work and government documents.

Much has changed and we will find out soon in what ways. But we are not alone in facing these things; we have each other, and the Mother of God is with us, as she was through the Great Terror of the 1930’s, the Second World War, the difficult decades after the war, and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

We greet you across the continents. Why not take three minutes and watch some of our young people singing. They are great and they wish you courage!