

Behind the grille: Nuns put altar breadmaking on hold during coronavirus lockdown

Vicki Anderson 05:00, May 09 2020



CHRIS SKELTON/STUFF

Sister Catherine from the Carmelite Monastery in Christchurch during the Covid-19 alert 4 lockdown.

The Covid-19 lockdown has affected the day-to-day lives of nuns at a Christchurch monastery. Vicki Anderson reports.

Not even those living a monastic life are immune from the effects of coronavirus.

The Carmelite Monastery in Christchurch, where silence has reigned for 87 years, has become quieter during the lockdown.

Separated from the world, 13 cloistered nuns aged from 28 to 90 years spend their days in prayer and dedicated solitude.

The sisters may live in a "permanent sort of lockdown" but the Covid-19 pandemic has reached behind the monastery's high concrete wall to impact their daily life.

Some of the nuns' regular work has ceased. They are not making altar bread which forms the majority of their income.

Nor are the 13 sisters taking orders for other religious items to be made by hand.

"By our vow of poverty and trust in God's providence, this is not something we are worrying about," says Sister Catherine of Christ.

"It's amazing how quickly the human person can adapt. What we thought impossible and unimaginable a couple of months ago is now becoming a matter of right, how can we make this work with what we have?"

When we first speak it is during Lent, which means the Carmel of Christ the King Monastery is in silence.



SISTER CATHERINE

Sister Catherine, a nun at the Carmelite Monastery in Christchurch, took some pictures of life behind the wall during the Covid-19 lockdown. Unable to make altar bread, the nuns have been praying for humanity, attending mass via livestream and collecting walnuts.

However, an exemption is made for our interview.

Because of the extraordinary circumstances, Sister Catherine speaks not from behind the grille as usual. Instead we are granted permission to speak by cellphone and correspond by email.

"Only a few weeks ago we would have thought what we are living through unthinkable, unbelievable, even impossible," she says.

"We are very much in the same boat as everyone else right now in terms of adjusting to a new normal with its unprecedented realities and uncertainties."

The nuns have educated themselves on recommended hygiene practices for this pandemic and set up a small disinfectant station at the monastery entrance.

"It's become the first port-of-call for any goods coming into the monastery. I suspect it will be there for quite a few months to come."

Like many other New Zealanders, the nuns who rarely venture beyond the confines of the monastery, are diversifying to survive during the pandemic lockdown.

"One example is that the flour that is not being used for altar bread making is now being used to make our daily bread."

After morning mass each day the nuns start work.

This is important not only for the general running of life in the monastery, but also because they work in order to support themselves.

They receive a steady stream of orders for hand-painted baptismal and wedding candles.

"Our 90-year-old sister is still happily engaged in this beautiful work. Other of our artistic sisters are kept busy with statue repair."

The monastery is situated on 2.4 hectares in Halswell, around 15 minutes from the city centre.



SISTER CATHERINE

Holy week at Carmelite Monastery during lockdown for Covid-19.

"We have an orchard with 22 fruit trees, a large vegetable garden and a small farm of three steers. Currently they are Ayrshire breed and rather beautiful to see grazing in the paddocks," says Sister Catherine.

"Stevie is mostly red, Louis is mostly white and Frankie is half and half. We also have a cat Sophie, the rodent control specialist and the real boss at the monastery."

On an ordinary day the sisters expect their doorbell to chime often.

Now it has also been silenced by Covid-19.

"Throughout the day we might have people stopping in to pick up an altar bread order for a parish, or someone coming to speak to a sister with prayer requests, or tradesmen for the last of our earthquake repairs, or deliveries," she says.

"All that has stopped."

The sisters have been spending time in the garden, "collecting walnuts", or doing other projects that would otherwise be "on the backburner".

Daily mass is viewed via livestream at the Catholic Diocese of Christchurch website.

"It's been sad not being able to have the mass held in our chapel each day as we usually do. We miss the presence of the priest and congregation."

The nuns are also following the news "more closely".

"As nuns dedicated to a life of prayer, we want to avoid information-overload, and try to be very discerning in the news we do receive."

One sister checks the news each day on RNZ. She also collates articles from around New Zealand and the world for the nuns to read in the refectory so that they "hear it all together".

"If there is an important announcement from the Government regarding Covid-19 we watch it together at our evening recreation. This has reminded our oldest sisters of World War II when, as children, they would gather with their family each day around the radio to hear news of the war."



SISTER CATHERINE

They are concerned by the global spread of the disease. "This is now the focus of our heartfelt prayers... an end to this virus and relief for the suffering it has brought upon our world."

At the monastery there are five hours of formal prayer a day. Each day begins with prayer in the chapel at 6am.

"This is the first of seven times that we come together each day to pray the ancient prayer of the church, commonly called The Divine Office."

There are also two hours of silent prayer.

"It is this silent prayer, and our focus on prayer throughout the day, that characterises our life as nuns. Meaning that our purpose, our *raison d'être*, is nothing other than praying for the church and the world."

The traditional habit of Carmel is brown and white, with a black veil and it is always worn. It serves not only the practical purpose of being "timeless, modest and effortless", but it also has symbolic value.

The black veil represents service until death, the lifelong promise a woman can make, as Sister Catherine did, usually six years after entering the order.

"Our habit is brown because our founder, St Teresa of Avila, wanted it to be of the cheapest material, which in 16th century Spain was brown sheep wool."

Meals are eaten together but in silence, with one sister reading from a spiritual book or Catholic newspaper.

After their midday meal there is an hour of recreation.

"We talk and share together in our recreation room. In the early afternoon we have a time of optional rest, followed by an hour of spiritual reading."

To relax Sister Catherine enjoys reading, vegetable gardening, walks and "crafting gifts from scratch".

The afternoon work period is nestled between times of prayer in the chapel.

"At 6pm we have our evening meal, followed by another recreation hour. The day draws to a close with night prayer and quiet time as each sister retires to her cell."

"We are begging the Lord for so many things: to have mercy on the dying, to comfort those mourning loved ones, to give strength to medical and frontline workers, to inspire governments and decision makers, for all those serving our communities, for those working on a cure, for those experiencing great anxiety or stress or pain or loneliness..."

Sister Catherine's decision to enter the Carmelites, and take the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, came in stages.

Born in Southland, Catherine Smith grew up in Kurow and looks back fondly on her rural upbringing.

"At a young age I stopped going to church with my family. In the back of my young mind I had the idea that I would turn to God when I was dying and so go to heaven."

She wasn't raised Catholic and the only nuns she had seen growing up were those in the *Sound of Music* movie.

"I never imagined being a nun. My childhood dream was simply to help people when I grew up. I didn't see clearly as a child how that would come about."

However, by 15 she realised she was "yearning for God and his love".

At 18 she began her reception into the Catholic Church and her path became clearer in her early 20s while she was doing missionary work in the United States.

"Once in particular, I was walking through a cemetery in Atlanta, and I saw a gravestone which had the words DEO GRATIAS in place of the man's name which was written underneath and was much smaller," she recalls.

"I was struck with the thought: no matter what this man lived and suffered in his life, his last words were, 'Thanks be to God'. I was very touched by this."

She was 27, and living in Washington DC, when she contacted the Carmelites in New Zealand to begin a process of discernment.

Last October she took her final vows in the presence of her family, renouncing the ownership and administration of her own possessions.

"My decision to be a nun was very painful for all my family. Yet as I've had my heart bent on doing God's will for more than half of my life now, they've had no choice but to resign themselves to this fact," she says.

"It was very gracious of them to join me at what was the most special day of my life – my final vows. Having my family here with me on that day meant a great deal to me."

She admits it was difficult to give up the idea of marriage and family.

"I think the human heart is naturally wired to make a total and loving commitment. It is only by the grace of God that one can live a life of chastity for his sake."

A history of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church has been highlighted by recent high profile cases.

How has this affected those in the monastery?

"My spirit aches when I think of what the victims have suffered by way of sexual abuse. The fact that it has happened within the Catholic church is so sad and so perplexing that it leaves one stunned speechless."

"It does seem to me now that a fundamental shift is occurring, where an approach of zero tolerance towards perpetrators and solidarity with victims is taking deep root. But the fruit of this change will perhaps only be evident with time."

People often have misconceptions about a nun's life. They imagine it "a waste, pointless or even selfish".

"It takes faith to believe in the value of a life of prayer."

It is a strange feeling for those in a monastery to know the rest of the world is living in lockdown.

Life as a hermit has taught Sister Catherine to "listen attentively to life, to be patient and discerning in the face of a multitude of opinions and recommendations and upheaval".

During her many hours of solitude recently, Sister Catherine has been contemplating the fragility of human life; suffering and death; that what seemed certain and unchanging about life can become uncertain and changed.

"One hopes that, even though such times bring out the worst in some people and groups, that it is bringing out the best in a great deal more... many people will come out the other side of this crisis in a better place in their lives than when they went into it.

"I feel already that this is true for me and I hope and believe it will be for many others."

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