

Monastic Hospitality after COVID

Over the last 14 months several the saints have kept me company in my prayer. Some of these companions of mine will be familiar to you. Others will be unknown. Some are famous, and some deeply personal. I want to begin by speaking about these companions of mine, because each one of them will have something to say to us about our topic at hand, which is *monastic hospitality after COVID*.

The most obvious, at least for our purposes, are of course the Martyrs of Memphis¹, Sisters Constance, Thecla, Ruth and Frances, and their co-workers The Reverends Charles Parsons and Louis Schuler. I do not need to go into their story, because it is no doubt familiar to all of us. All that needs to be said is that as Anglican and Episcopal religious, they are in a sense our patron saints and primary examples, of what it means to live and serve during a pandemic.

Two of my other companions are perhaps an odd pairing, unless of course, you know their stories. Florence Nightingale² and Mother Hannah Grier Coome³, the Foundress of the Sisterhood of Saint John the Divine in Toronto, have also made their presence known these last months. What unites them is the nineteenth century revolution in nursing, that you might argue was the direct result of war. Nightingale's war was the Crimean War⁴ and Mother Hannah's was the 1885 North-West Resistance⁵ in what is now the province of Saskatchewan. It is interesting that both women took nuns⁶, not to the battlefield, but to military hospitals, and the experience of religious sisters had a profound impact on the wounded and dying, as well as the officers and medical staff. Both women returned home to found hospitals and train nurses, and the influence of their work, and that of the early sisters, lead directly to the professionalization of nursing as a career, and, I would argue, the creation of modern hospitals and the high level of health care so many of us now enjoy.

My other companion is perhaps a curious one, and that's Julian of Norwich⁷. We are all familiar with Julian and her *Revelations of Divine Love*, but she has appeared in my prayer, not because of her *Revelations*, but rather because of the context from which that remarkable text appeared, a context not unlike our own.

Living in the latter half of the fourteenth, and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries one would think there was nothing about her life that would resonate with ours. However, like us, she lived at a time of much worry, anxiety, and turmoil. Twenty years before her birth in 1353, the Great Famine⁸ swept Northern Europe leaving up to 25 percent of the population dead. Shortly after her birth, the Black Death⁹ struck, leaving up to half the population of the city of Norwich itself

¹ <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2020/04/17/martyrs-of-memphis-have-lessons-to-teach-those-battling-covid-19/> downloaded 19 April 2021.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florence_Nightingale downloaded 19 April 2021.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah_Grier_Coome downloaded 19 April 2021.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crimean_War downloaded 19 April 2021.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North-West_Rebellion downloaded 19 April 2021.

⁶ Along with some Roman Catholic sisters, members of the Park Village Sisterhood and the Devonport Sisterhood (which later merged to become the Sisterhood of the Holy and Undivided Trinity or SHUT) accompanied Nightingale to Crimea. These two communities, founded by Marian Rebecca Hughes and Priscilla Lydia Hughes, were the first two religious communities founded in the Church of England since the Reformation.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_of_Norwich downloaded 19 April 2021.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Famine_of_1315%E2%80%9317 downloaded 19 April 2021.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Death downloaded 19 April 2021.

dead, and killing up to an estimated 200 million people in Europe, Eurasia and North Africa. It would take centuries for the population of Europe to return to previous pre-Black Death numbers. Both these events lead to the Peasants' Revolt¹⁰ in 1381, when the city of Norwich was overwhelmed by rebel forces. At the same time, early agitation for the reform of the Church, known as Lollardy¹¹, initially begun by John Wycliffe, was beginning to take root.

My other companion will be unknown to all of you, but he is part of our great cloud of witnesses here at SSJE. His name is Arthur Lee Ballard. Father Ballard came to SSJE from parish ministry in British Columbia and was clothed as a novice on Epiphany 1918. Almost immediately he was given permission to volunteer to work as a chaplain with the YMCA and was sent out to Mesopotamia. At the conclusion of the First World War, he returned to Cambridge, but by then he had already contracted chronic bronchitis. During the Flu Epidemic of 1918 – 1920¹² he came down with the flu and died on 8 February 1920. He was the first member of the Society to die in North America and one of an estimated 500 million people worldwide infected with the flu and one of the 20 to 50 million people who died as a result of the epidemic.

My last companion is a deeply personal one, and that is my grandmother Mavis Addie Koester. Grandma was born in Britain in 1897 and emigrated to Canada with her family in 1905. As a young woman of barely 20 she began teaching in a one room schoolhouse of the Canadian prairie. It was her generation of women who knew both the tragedy of the killing fields of France during the First War, and the impact of the 1918 – 1920 Flu Epidemic. During that Flu Epidemic Grandma exchanged her school bell for a nurse's uniform, and the schoolhouse became a hospital for flu patients, whom she nursed. That experience lived with her for the rest of her life, and in a sense set her on her course. Grandma was passionate about any number of things, among them was healthcare. She volunteered with the Victorian Order of Nurses¹³, a visiting nurse association dedicated to homecare and social services. She was also, I would say, politically radicalized by that experience, and became a lifelong supporter and active member of Canada's left wing social democratic party the CCF/ NDP¹⁴ in Saskatchewan. It was the CCF who first introduced universal, single payer health care insurance to Saskatchewan in 1961, and which later in the 1960's was copied and introduced right across Canada.

Now you may think I am a long way from my topic of monastic hospitality after COVID, but I am not, because I believe that each of these companions of mine has something to say to us, that can inform how we approach the ministry of hospitality, and what people might be looking for from us, in a post COVID world.

I think the first thing these companions of mine tell us, is that we have been here before, and unfortunately, we will be here again. COVID is just the latest, but in our lifetime alone, we have seen COVID, SARS, AIDS, polio, Ebola, swine flu, foot and mouth, and I am sure more. While I was not asked to give a history of pandemics, as fascinating as that might be, it is important to remember, we have been here before, and we will be here again. All my companions tell us that

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peasants%27_Revolt downloaded 19 April 2021.

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<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lollardy#:~:text=Lollard%2C%20Lollardi%2C%20or%20Loller%20was,the%20Bible%20into%20the%20English> downloaded 19 April 2021.

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_flu downloaded 19 April 2021.

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian_Order_of_Nurses downloaded 19 April 2021.

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Co-operative_Commonwealth_Federation downloaded 19 April 2021.

from Grandma to Father Ballard, to Mother Hannah and Florence Nightingale, to the Martyrs of Memphis, to Julian of Norwich. We have been here before, and we will be here again.

If that is the case, what are the signs of the time that we might want to pay attention to, and how might we respond.

I think my companions point out several things: grief, social and political upheaval, hope, and the centrality of a life anchored in prayer, to name some of them. I am sure there are others.

I believe that the most significant thing we will be facing in the years to come, and yes you heard me correctly, in the years to come, is a crisis of grief. While I could not have named that as a ten-year-old, aware that my grandmother lived through both World War I and the Flu Epidemic, I believed that she lived with a degree of grief from those experiences for the rest of her life. I do not know who she lost in the trenches of France, but there are some photographs in the family collection of unknown young men from that era. Obviously, she lost someone. Looking back n her life, I would also say that her experience of nursing during the Flu Epidemic politically radicalized her.

Some of you may have seen the opinion piece in the **New York Times** by Allison Gilbert last week called *The Grief Crisis is Coming*.¹⁵ In it, Gilbert estimates that for every death from COVID, nine people are bereaved. We are approaching the 570,000¹⁶ mark here in the US and the 25,000 mark in Canada.¹⁷ It is estimated that over 141 million individuals worldwide have contracted the virus and more than 3 million have died.¹⁸ Based on Gilbert's estimate, that for every death, there are 9 people grieving, that is an enormous amount of grief. Her estimate also only takes into account immediate family members. If extended family, friends, neighbours, and co-workers are included in the calculation, the number is astronomical. The toll is made even starker when you realize that at least 37,000 children in the United States alone have lost at least one parent to COVID. The grief those children carry will not only impact their mental and emotional health, but their education will also be adversely affected, and that will have an impact on jobs, housing, and income for the rest of their lives.

And that just takes into account the grief caused by death. The emotional toll of these past 14 months is incalculable. Think of the grandparents who have missed out on a year of their grandchildren's lives; of the children whose education will be marked, and indeed marred, for the rest of their lives, because in person classes have been suspended; of the countless people who live alone who have not been hugged in over a year; of those who have recovered, but now live with post-COVID Syndrome; of the people who have lost employment, health insurance, even secure housing. Think also of the emotional strain we have all been under ourselves, both as individuals and as households. None of us, except perhaps for our Brothers at Three Rivers, at

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/12/opinion/covid-death-grief.html?searchResultPosition=1> downloaded 19 April 2021.

¹⁶ https://www.google.com/search?q=deaths+from+covid&rlz=1C1GCEA_enUS907US907&oq=deaths&aqs=chrome.3.69i57j0i433j0i1131i433j0i433i2j69i6113.4606j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 downloaded 19 April 2021.

¹⁷ https://www.google.com/search?q=covid+deaths+canada+to+date&rlz=1C1GCEA_enUS907US907&oq=Covid+deaths+Canada&aqs=chrome.2.0i131i433j0j0i39513j0j0i395j0j0i39512.6145j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 downloaded 19 April 2021.

¹⁸ https://www.google.com/search?q=deaths+from+covid&rlz=1C1GCEA_enUS907US907&oq=&aqs=chrome.1.69i59i45018.92392j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 downloaded 19 April 2021.

the Sisters at OJN, entered an enclosed community. The fact that that has been in our life this past year has, I know, changed SSJE. I am sure it has changed your communities as well.

The emotional and mental health impact of COVID will last for decades. I saw that in my Grandmother. I believe we will see it in those who come to us, once we can safely re-open our guesthouses and chapels.

I believe that one of the things which we will need to do as monastics who have a ministry of hospitality is to make a safe, secure, and welcoming space for grief. Literally everyone who comes through our doors, indeed everyone with whom we come into contact in the next years, will be grieving, and we will need to make a space for that.

Monastic hospitality will be about opening space for grief.

We Brothers of SSJE remind ourselves that *[just] as we enrich our guests' lives, so they enrich ours. We welcome men and women of every race and culture, rejoicing in the breadth and diversity of human experience that they bring to us. Their lives enlarge our vision of God's world. The stories of their sufferings and achievements and their experience of God stir and challenge us. If we are attentive, each guest will be a word and gift of God to us.*¹⁹

In order, however, to open a space for grief, and to welcome each guest *as a word and gift of God to us*, whose stories of ... *suffering and achievements and their experience of God that will stir and challenge us* we will need to make a space for our own grief. When we can do that, others will see in us an authenticity which allows them to be vulnerable in return.

Again, we Brothers say concerning the vow of poverty that *[one] of the signs that our poverty is authentic will be the readiness of others to confide in us their own experiences of suffering, grief, and loss. If we are evading the mystery of poverty in our own lives, we will shut ourselves off from the pain and weakness in the lives of our brothers and sisters. If we are living our vow, they will find in our company a holy place of acceptance and understanding where they can wait for God to bring strength out of weakness and resurrection from death.*²⁰

I believe that a willingness to be honest about our own grief, will make it possible for others to share their grief with us. So, it may be that right now, even before we begin to think about reopening, we are being invited to pray, and even befriend, our own grief.

Part of praying our grief, is by being friends with death. St. Benedict instructs us to *live in fear of judgement day and have a great horror of hell. Yearn for everlasting life with holy desire. Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die...And finally, never lose hope in God's mercy.*²¹

It is our relationship with death, that allows us to sit with our grief. And we can sit with death because our lives are rooted in hope.

¹⁹ SSJE, *Rule of Life, Hospitality*, chapter 34, page 69

²⁰ *Ibid.*, *Engaging with Poverty*, chapter 8, page 17.

²¹ *Rule of St. Benedict, The Tools for Good Works*, chapter 4: 44 – 47, 74

Curiously, it is our relationship with death that is one of the great gifts, monastics have to offer the Church.

We are called to remember our mortality day by day with unflinching realism, shaking off the sleep of denial. Paradoxically, only those who remember that they are but dust, and to dust they shall return, are capable of accepting the presence of eternal life in each passing moment and receiving ever fresh the good news of hope. The anticipation of death is essential if we are to live each day to the full as a precious gift, and rise to the urgency of our vocation as stewards who will be called to give account at Christ's coming. Remembering that death can come to us at any time will spur us to be prepared, by continual renewal of our repentance and acceptance of the forgiveness of God, to meet Christ without warning. We shall remember to express to one another those things that would make us ready to part without regrets, especially thankfulness and reconciliation.

Week by week we are to accept every experience that requires us to let go as an opportunity for Christ to bring us through death into life. Hardships, renunciations, losses, bereavements, frustrations, and risks are all ways in which death is at work in advance preparing us for the self-surrender of bodily death. Through them we practice the final letting go of dying, so that it will be less strange and terrifying to us.²²

That gift, of being friends with death, is only made possible because our lives are rooted in baptismal hope.

The grace to surrender our lives to God through our vows has been given to us in Baptism whereby we die with Christ and are raised with him. It is the same grace that gives strength to martyrs to submit gladly to death as witnesses of the resurrection. From the beginning monks and nuns have been encouraged to understand their own commitment in the light of the freedom and trust that enables martyrs to give up their lives to the glory of God. The witness of the martyrs should never be far from our minds as we go forward in the vowed life day by day.²³

Such a life is, by its nature, a life of hope which accepts the paradoxical reality of the cruelty of death without denying the promise of resurrection life, for we believe that the One who is resurrection and life, is also the same as the one who wept at the tomb of his friend.²⁴

As monastics then, we can sit with death and grief, because we are primarily women and men of hope. That, I believe will be another mark of monastic hospitality in the years to come. We will need to be places of hope, that are firmly grounded by the reality of death.

It is the power of hope, rooted not in wishful thinking, but the reality of Christ crucified, dead, buried, and risen, that is the core of our Easter faith. It is this hope that will calm our fears, and reveal to us the risen, but wounded Christ, speaking to us the resurrection greeting *Peace*.²⁵

²² SSJE, *Rule, Holy Death*, chapter 48, page 96 - 97

²³ Ibid, *Life Profession*, chapter 39, page 79

²⁴ See the story of the Raising of Lazarus, John 11

²⁵ Luke 24: 36; John 20: 19; John 20: 21; John 20: 26

In a rather colourful way, Father Benson speaks of such hope when he says *[our] life must be a life of continual hope. Often it will seem irksome... This must often be the case. We need to live in supernatural hope in order to be sustained when such times come. Oh! Hope must carry us over the gulf, like a vehicle which, born with an impetus down some steep mountainside, is carried over the gulf and reaches the other side below in safety. What is it which draws downward with such speed that vehicle, which seems to be ready to plunge us into danger? It is the power of gravitation. And what is hope but the gravitation of the whole being to God, not by the link of natural law, but by the link of a supernatural unity of life. The natural law of our nature gives us a tendency in other directions, is continually repressing us. But this gravitation towards God draws us onward.*²⁶

As I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, one of my companions this year has been Julian of Norwich. Not, as I said, because of her writing, but because of the context in which she lived, a context not unlike our own. Mother Hilary is much more equipped to speak of how Julian's writings might show us a way forward than I am. What I want us to do is to think for a moment about the world around her, and us.

Now I am not an historian of medicine, and nor, as I said, is this a history of pandemics, but I think that historians would argue there is a direct connection between the Great Famine of 1315, the Black Death which raged through Europe between 1347 and 1351 and the social, political, and religious upheaval that followed it. As I mentioned, the Peasants' Revolt and the rise of Lollardy followed quickly on the heels of these events. Is it any wonder then, that amid a pandemic, this country has seen Trumpism attempt to thwart a presidential election, and now, at least in this country, legislated voter suppression, the deaths of countless black men at the hands of the police with Black Lives Matter taking centre stage, the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes, and gun violence and mass shootings reach the horrific number of 126 mass shootings²⁷, with 148 individuals killed, and 485 people wounded.²⁸

I understand and accept there is no single cause for any of these, and to say that COVID is responsible, is simplistic, without considering the history of slavery, racism, and white privilege, not to mention the Doctrine of Discovery. But whatever the causes, and I would argue COVID is one of them, we are in a time of unmasking when social, political, economic, and religious fault lines are being exposed, and society is undergoing a dramatic transformation. It was at a time like this that Julian received her revelations, and wrote with such confidence about the mercy, grace, and love of God. In the face of it all, Julian wrote those famous words, *all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*²⁹

That I believe, is another mark of monastic hospitality in a post-Covid world: confidence that indeed all shall be well. Such a confidence as Julian's, grasps the reality of sin and the promise of God who will make all things new.³⁰

²⁶ Benson SSJE, Richard Meux, *Instructions on the Religious Life, Second Series*, 1935, page 117

²⁷ While there is no generally accepted definition of what constitutes a mass shooting, it is generally accepted that it is when 3 or more people are killed at roughly the same time and place.

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_mass_shootings_in_the_United_States_in_2021 downloaded 19 April 2021.

²⁹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter 27

³⁰ Revelation 21: 5

As monastics committed to living out our baptismal covenant³¹ in a particular way, our guesthouses will need to be places that respect the dignity of every human being. That will mean that many of us will have to do the hard work of confronting our individual and corporate racism, and how white privilege, and whiteness, shapes and informs our communities.

One of the things which we do at the Monastery at Compline on the anniversary of a Brother's death, is read their obituary. That's how I first met Father Ballard. I have also looked through his file, seen his photograph, and spent time at his grave. All of that has made him a real person for me. He is not just a statistic. His death, just over 100 years ago now, is personal. The same is true for every single person who has died of COVID. To someone, they are not simply a statistic. They are a person: a mother; a father; a spouse or partner; a son or daughter; a brother or sister; a grandparent or grandchild; a neighbour or co-worker. The grief, loss, and anxiety people are feeling is real because real lives are involved.

One of the gifts of monastic hospitality is that we are not a hotel. We do not deal with customers. We deal with people, with real people, with individuals who have names, and stories.

It is not enough merely to offer accommodation to visitors. Our faith must recognize the one who comes to us in the person of the guest, the stranger and the pilgrim. It is the Lord, who has identified himself with each of his sisters and brothers. If we are to give them bread and not stones, and truly meet Christ in them face to face, we must realize the gifts the Holy Spirit has given us for the ministry of hospitality, and remember how deeply people are yearning for the things of God.³²

Another mark of post-COVID monastic hospitality is that we will continue to meet Christ in all who come to us, seeing them as individuals, with real stories, and who are a *word and gift of God to us.*³³

What strikes me, is that none of the work I have described is easy, so I want to say a few things about us, not so much about communities, but about us as individuals within a community.

The first thing is that this work will be exhausting. Grief is exhausting. Holding space open for our own grief, and a place for others to share their grief will be exhausting work. We need to be prepared for that. We all know that guest ministry, at the best of times is exhausting work. This will be even more exhausting.

The second thing that we need to remember is that this work will change us, even perhaps radicalize us. Following their experience of war, and social and political upheaval, Florence Nightingale and Mother Hannah did not retire to nice quiet lives. They returned home with a passion to change things. Like my grandmother, they spent the rest of their lives addressing the burning issues of their day. This work will change us, even radicalize us. We will not be able simply to return to doing things the way they have always been done. If we do, we will lose an opportunity to meet the Risen Christ who travels ahead of us, and not behind us. As Father

³¹ **Book of Common Prayer, 1979**, page 304 - 305

³² SSJE, *Rule, Hospitality*, chapter 34, page 68

³³ *Ibid.*, page 69

Benson reminds us, *[a] religious must be essentially a [person] of great hope. [Their] whole life is one of hope. [They are] ever living in the future. Though things should be realized around [them] beyond all conception, yet [they dare] not pause to think upon them; [they are] still looking out. Though things be dark and threatening, [they dare] not draw backward. [They] must still be looking on.*³⁴

Lastly, we must continue to be people of prayer and intercession. The Martyrs of Memphis were able to give their lives, not because they were heroic, although they were, but because they were faithful to their life of prayer.

Writing in 1878, Sister Constance said this: *One comfort we have that we never had before, and perhaps could never under other circumstances – the Reservation [of the Blessed Sacrament] – always in the Church. It is not often possible to go it, but we have the key, and it does not take long to run through the little gallery leading from the Community Room. That, and the daily Celebration, do make such a difference in our life here!*³⁵

Whatever it is that we are to do, and whatever monastic hospitality after COVID is to look like, it needs to be firmly rooted in our life of prayer, as individuals, and as communities, or else, I would argue, there is no purpose in it.

So, what will monastic hospitality look like after COVID? It will I think be shaped by, and need to respond to grief, loss, trauma, and dislocation. It will have the power to change, convert, radicalize, and challenge us in ways we can't even now imagine. It will need to be rooted in hope and prayer. And in it all, we will meet the Risen Christ who says to us, *Peace*.

Questions for reflection:

1. What signs of the times are you seeing that will shape monastic hospitality in the years to come?
2. How might you as a community, or an individual, become a (more) welcoming place for grief?
3. What rhythms of life might need to be changed to prepare and sustain you to do some of this work?

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³⁴ Benson SSJE, Richard Meux, *Instructions on the Religious Life, Second Series*, 1935, page 111

³⁵ As quoted in *They Still Speak*, edited by J. Robert Wright, Church Hymnal Corporation, New York, 1993, page 163