

MONASTERIO SANTA MARIA DE LA SANTISIMA TRINIDAD

LURIN – LIMA – PERU

Dear Members of the parishes of St Elizabeth and St Anne,

It is a long time since I last wrote to you, but you have often been in my thoughts and prayers. The pandemic has touched all of us in different ways, and maybe I should give you some account of what it has been like in Peru over the last eighteen months or so since it began. Most days I look at the news in one of the Peruvian papers, which tells you each day how long it is since the State of Emergency began here: today – 6 September – it is the 540<sup>th</sup> day. The statistics tell us that we are now down to something like 10% of the number of cases we had at the peak of the pandemic, and the number of deaths, which was something like 500 a day around Easter, is now down to less than 30 a day. We have had two “waves”, one last year and one this year, round February to June. The worry, of course, is that a third wave could come. They are busy vaccinating people; I received my vaccinations in May and June, and they are now vaccinating people in their thirties.

So much for the wider picture. Living in our monastery in Lurin, which is a suburb to the south of Lima, we are in many ways very fortunate. Our monastery was built for cloistered nuns, and they built a high wall round the whole of our fruit farm – something over 20 acres – which meant that when we were in lockdown, we could still walk outside, and of course there is a good deal of work to be done on the farm. Lurin is not a rich area, and there a lot of people living in poor accommodation; the lockdown will have been much worse for them.

The first lockdown lasted from mid-March last year until the beginning of July, and during that time the only people who left the monastery were people doing the shopping and other essential tasks – I never left the monastery once during this time. When the second “wave” started earlier this year, a new lockdown started at the beginning of February, but at the end of the month they ended this: even though the number of cases continued to rise until after Easter, the damage to the economy was too severe.

I have had very few trips into the city during the pandemic: only those which were unavoidable, as public transport was thought to be rather risky. We have to wear not only a face-mask, but on the buses we also have to wear a facial protector – a plastic shield protecting the whole face. And in shops they often ask for a double face-mask.

I continue to look after the novices here in our monastery. I have three in my care at present; one, who has been with us for more than three years now, and who is due to make his first vows in October; and two postulants – that is, candidates who have not yet entered the novitiate; one has been here for nearly two years, and one for a little less than a year. They have been given responsibility for the poultry: we have chickens, ducks and turkeys; and every so often we have a morning when birds are killed and all of us help the plucking. Not what I had expected when I came out here, but it is an interesting experience! We also have mornings, at present quite often: once or twice a week, when we do manual work together on the farm.

I had a wonderful trip down to Chile over Easter this year. You may remember that I went down to Patagonia, in the south of Chile, early on in my time at St Elizabeth’s, and two years ago

I went there for Easter. I was asked last year to go there again for Holy Week and Easter, but of course with the lockdown it was impossible – apart from anything else the frontiers were closed and there were no aeroplanes. But this year it was possible, and I went. The number of precautions that I had to take was amazing: in all I had three to take three PCR tests, and I had two bouts of quarantine, plus loads of paperwork – and when I was in Chile I had to submit a daily report about my health to the Ministry of Health! The area of Patagonia I was in is very isolated, and practically free from Covid: and of course they want to keep it like that! So not only were there lots of checks at the international airport in Santiago when I arrived in Chile, but there were just as many checks in the tiny airport in Patagonia: I think it normally gets one flight a day, but the place was swarming with soldiers, police and health officials!

I was staying in a house of the lay Benedictine community which our monasteries are linked with, and they have been asked by the Bishop to take care of part of the local parish: that means, they look after two small villages, each about twenty miles away from the community's house, which is about half way between them, and each of them has its own chapel. So as well as acting as chaplain for the community and for the young people who were there with them, some for several months, some just for Holy Week and Easter, I also went to the chapels; and I also celebrated the funeral Mass for a lady who died while I was there. In the little village, everybody knew her, so the chapel was crowded: it was a very moving occasion.

Our church has been closed ever since the pandemic began, but we transmit daily Mass, and a lot of people follow it – more than could fit into the church; I think it has been the same in England. We have a guesthouse, but it has been very quiet since the pandemic began. During the lockdown, of course, no one was able to come; now, we have a few people coming to us, but it is usually members of religious communities – in other words, people who are already living in the same house. We also have a shop, and before the pandemic a lot of people came to Sunday Mass and then visited our shop afterwards. That has completely stopped, of course, and during the lockdown there were no visitors coming to the shop, but now we have quite a number of people coming during the week.

Of course, during the pandemic, I have not been giving many retreats. And apart from my trip to Chile I have not been out of Peru since the pandemic began. Sadly, Peru is on the “red” list for England, so I don't think I am going to be able to come back for a visit to England for some time yet.

But be sure that I continue to keep you in my prayers, and please continue to pray for me and for our community here in Lurin.

fr. Richard OSB