

A Nation of Monks

by Rev. Benjamin P. Bradshaw



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Historian David McCullough often said of the Prohibition era of the 1920s: “At a time when the country needed a stiff drink the most, none were to be found.” The Roaring 20s, as they were deemed, were not all a bed of roses for the country or the Catholic Church, and when we collectively found ourselves thrust into the Great Depression in 1929, a new and sobering word suddenly became very real: humility. The nationwide prohibition on alcohol was, perhaps, not such an enormous cross to bear, but somehow underscored the need for some relief, sign of hope, or small respite, as the nation found itself plunged into a financial cesspool. Seemingly out of the blue, virtually everyone in the country were reminded of how easily life could humble them and how little they can actually control. McCullough’s vignette is perhaps apropos given the times in which we live, under nationwide quarantine and COVID19 isolation. We have become, ipso facto, a nation of monks, spending large swaths of time cocooned at home and avoiding any signs of affection. Perhaps we could say, then, at a time when the nation needs a hug the most, none are to be found.

With this in mind, how do families, and in particular couples, cope with suddenly being at home all day-every-day with each other, and not lose their cool? If it is true that ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder,’ this time together will likely end well for those we miss seeing and very bad indeed for those we currently see on a daily basis. Put simply: how do we keep from losing patience with our spouse and family after seeing them all day, every day? Keeping in mind the man writing this is a celibate, notwithstanding this detail, I think it is safe to say that we can glean a few lessons from this domestic elevator we collectively find ourselves trapped in.

There are three pivotal elements to any good communication: humility, perspective, and prayer. Humility is absolutely essential for couples in communication because, an obvious point, without it one will never listen to the critiques or suggestions of others, especially when you know what she will say and how she will say it because you have heard it a thousands times before. Usually when this happens, one is thinking of his or her response as one’s spouse is talking, instead of actively listening to her points. In essence, we have to crawl inside their words as if we have never heard them before. Listening is a great act of love, but only comes when someone is humble first.

Older couples often say, “This person has seen me at my worst and still loves me anyway.” I love that. Priests could say the same thing about parishioners I think. In other words, a couple usually has their best and most meaningful conversations when they are both relaxed and speak from the heart, and that usually comes from hard-earned experience. This requires that neither is ‘walking on eggshells,’ reading cryptic meanings into innocuous acts or words, or ‘making a mountain out of a molehill.’ When a spouse feels like she has to avoid certain topics because they trigger a fight, neither can really relax and this eventually spills over into other topics. The couple gets to a point of relaxing in their communication when they both realize how much they have weathered together and each has a deep sense of gratitude for that love. With this realization, the couple gains an invaluable treasure: perspective. This is important because when they have perspective, they are far less prone to be frazzled and

frightened when challenges arise, as they always do, in the future. When you can relax, your spouse can relax better as well and communication becomes more organic and less forced.

Finally, it goes without saying that communication with others is virtually impossible when communication with God is not happening first. Basically, “You can’t give what you don’t have,” and without prayer, at least to some degree, a couple’s communication has no fresh air or fresh ideas, in the same way that a priest’s homilies will lack fresh perspective and insight (e.g. “canned homily”) without prayer. It doesn’t need to be long hours in prayer together, but it needs to happen every week together. Yes. Every. Week.

We will one day crawl out of our homes after this “virus crisis,” perhaps like trolls coming into the light or Lazarus coming out of the tomb (Jn 11:1-44). In the meantime, our time with our spouse and kiddos is now a blessing from God, let’s keep it that way.