

LIFE UNDER LOCKDOWN

Like billions other people around the world, we in our Sacred Hearts formation house in Suva, Fiji, have experienced the fear, cabin fever and other challenges and, surprisingly, joy in this time of lock-down.

We got the initial shock and bad news in late March of the first CoViD case in Fiji. Our mood in the house was fittingly solemn but also resolved. At one point, Fr. Johnathan reassured us: “We will get through this together.”

We had a few days off as our school Pacific Regional Seminary was deliberating and discerning about possibly closing as had the other local colleges and universities. However, the administration, teachers, and students wanted to make a go of finishing off the term. Because of the social distancing mandate, switching to on-line courses on the fly was necessary. Eric set up PRS with the Zoom video conferencing program and trained the teachers and tech savvy students who would in turn help their communities transition. Soon we were Zooming our classes, continuing our learning and preparation, and giving us the chance to see each other even if only on our computer screens.



Year 7 Gospel of Luke course led by Fr. Jim Kyaw Hoe, SDB

Since nearly all the schools and colleges were closed, Rector Fr. Simon and his staff had to walk a difficult line of satisfying the safety concerns of the police and continuing the educational process. As much as we students enjoy our free time, we are determined to do our coursework so we can move on to the fields where Christ is calling us. PRS indeed had to endure multiple police checks, and we also began to fear police visits.



We moved to celebrating our Eucharist in the common room so we could follow social distancing. Then the Prime Minister of Fiji banned public gatherings including worship after a Fijian priest was arrested for celebrating a funeral mass. We decided to shift to Zoom masses which meant most of us watching the mass via our computers and afterwards coming for communion. Fr. Marisi Palepale, after celebrating the Eucharist from his room, remarked that he felt like the Good Father in the Granary in La Motte D'Usseau. We were having visions of Fr. Coudrin, the Marche-à-Terre, during the reign of Terror as we closed our shades and kept down our voices.

We watched the alarming news on cable of the spreading pandemic. Particularly hard has been seeing ravaged areas of the world where our loved ones live, especially the United States. It was also difficult to know that lockdowns were cutting us off from loved ones in Samoa and Tonga. We took this to God in our prayers.

The reality of lock down hit us as a case of CoViD surfaced just about 500 meters from our house. We were concerned that this virus might be spreading all around us.

A few days later on Tuesday morning of Holy Week, Cyclone Harold, a category 3 storm, was barrelling down on us. We were spared the worst, only losing power briefly although Fijian islands to the south suffered extensive damage. Five hundred homes on Kadavu were destroyed.



Kadavu, Fiji

The harder blow was Lui receiving news later that night that his mom Reki had passed away. He would not be able to go to the funeral because we were under lockdown. Despite this extreme hardship, Lui experienced blessings too. Fr. Semi, a graduate of PRS and friend of Lui, helped make arrangements for the funeral on the other main island of Fiji, Vanua Levu. Lui was also able to see family living in Suva. Here is a part of the poem that Lui shared with our community:

“Gold is Valueless until mined
Oil is useless at the bottom of the well
And my slightest talent would not have found expression
But my slightest talent would not have found expression
but for your eyes, your thoughts your comforting words and to you all
this grateful tribute is tendered. I am taking this moment to express my
sincere gratitude in the times I am facing right now.

I am so glad that I am in a House that I am able to call my family. The family that stood by you in times of trouble.

Thank your Father Jonathan and Fr Marisi for offering up the Masses for mom. It is not easy and is still not easy and I am still healing.”

Often the sound of laughter comes from the kitchen and common room as the brothers lift each other’s spirits with playful banter and jokes. We aren’t supposed to get too loud to draw attention to our community; however, it is hard to control the spirit of love and joy.

Despite the reality of the suffering that is happening now in the world and our small inconveniences, we have experienced several gifts from God in this difficult time:

- More time for prayer, especially for those with CoViD and those impacted by this scourge of a virus. We even had a second Adoration chapel for a while. The prayer time for Holy Week was especially rich and poignant. We are grateful for this time of silence with the Lord though we hope it won’t be too long. We are an apostolic order after all!
- More brotherly bonding: time for conversation and to support one another. Even some more recreational time- Vinaka, Daniel, for sharing your Nintendo!
- The brothers shared wonderful culinary gifts as our cook Sova had to return home: Marisi’s steamed fish, Rafa surprising us with Fiji donuts one morning, *Kacunda* - Tongan raw fish in honour of Br. Lomano on his 29th birthday (so he said), delicious sweet and sour fish. Daniel with his teriyaki chicken. Fr. Johnathan baked bread numerous times - which made me think of Jesus cooking for the disciples at Emmaus; Fr. Marisi baked delicious desserts. Jesus would have baked desserts too, yes? We will have to ask our lecturers. Our Pacifican brothers- Sepu, Rafa, Gaby, Lui, and Tavite took turns scraping the coconuts gathered from our backyard to be used for the *lu*. As you know, love (*loloma*) is always the best ingredient.



Fr. Marisi and Soane

- Time for reading and catching up on our papers. Even some time for fellowship and *talanoa* (conversation) and *kava*- especially to be in support of Lui.
- Lomano led trips to the “farm” on the Vincentian compound in a nearby village where we get our steady supply of *dalo* and *cassava*.



Rafa



Lomano

- Br. Soane bravely went out donning his mask and gloves to venture to the market to bring us back food.

Our Holy Week was more stark and stripped down than ever before as for so many hundreds of millions of Catholics and other Christians. On the night of Easter vigil, we received a blow in the news that our beloved dean of PRS and wonderful teacher of philosophy, Fr. Falani Terry, SM, passed away. One of our teachers Fr. Don shared that he often heard laughter when going by Fr. Falani's classes. His thought: "I didn't realize philosophy could be so funny". Plato wrote that learning should be enjoyable; Fr. Falani certainly shared that joy.

We were able say goodbye to Fr. Falani at a brief viewing at the PRS chapel on Friday of Easter Week. Later we watched the funeral mass on livestream. Sepu wrote a really beautiful and touching prayer for the intercessions:

"We pray for all those who were touched and have been inspired by the life of Fr. Falani as a teacher and as a priest, especially his family, students all who came to know him, that may his works, his words and his wisdom continue to light their way in dark times. Thank you Fr. for being a part of our lives."



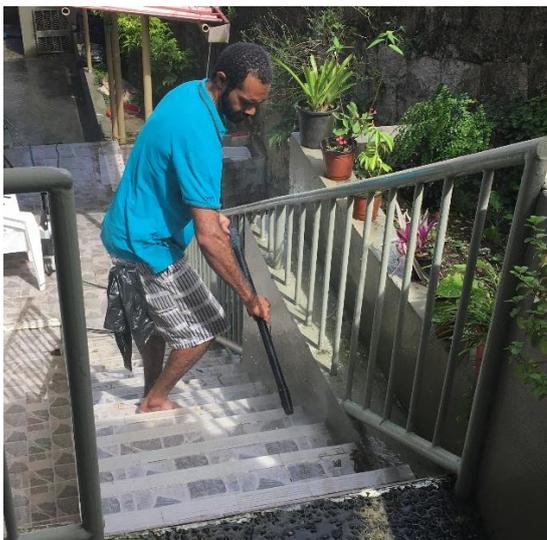
If you want to see and listen to a really powerful, wonderful, and engaging Holy Thursday homily (by Fr. Falani), see this link:

<https://www.facebook.com/PacificRegionalSeminaryOfficial/videos/2361192137459277/>



Br. Lui, outside the PRS chapel.

- Divine Mercy Sunday: we welcomed back the four pre-novices: Gaby, Sepulona, Rafa, and Tavite, who chose to continue their planned retreat even though they could not go to the retreat house. We had a lovely feast with many delicious Pacific foods: *lu* (corned beef and coconut wrapped in *dalo* leaves) by Soane, peach pie by Fr. Marisi, curry lamb by Patrick.



Patrick



Gaby

We welcomed two new community members Cici and Didi, novice rodent controllers. They also provide free pet therapy for us when we get stressed by our Zoom courses and worries about CoViD.



Cici

Didi

We ask for your prayers as we pray for you. Let us help one another. Our hope is that CoViD spares us here in Fiji and that the virus dies down where you are and you stay well. We hope that we might be able to return to some semblance of normalcy at PRS and we can finish the school year. We are very desirous to serve God and His people. God bless you. As our founder, Fr. Pierre Coudrin said, Trust in Divine Providence, and as St. Damien wrote - cast your cares upon the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

Bill Gural

