

The effects of Corona - the virus not the beer!

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Fr Michael Riordan working on Isidore Farm. Photo: St Columbans Mission Society

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I suspect that in future years rather than BC and AD we will have BC and PC (Before-COVID and Post-COVID) as this "experience" has had immense effects on all aspects of our lives.

To be honest, living in Jeju (*Jeju Island is the largest island in South Korea, located in the Jeju Province*) has meant that I have had to put up with little disruption of my daily life. Here we have not been under lockdown and while funerals and weddings, for the most part, have been cancelled or low key in the Churches; outside things seem very much as before. Because of my involvement with Isidore (*Isidore Farm was established by Columban, Fr P J McGlinchey to eradicate the poverty of Jeju.*) I attend quite a few non-Catholic weddings and funerals, and these have continued more or less as before. I attended a wedding (more accurately the 'afters') recently where there were over a thousand guests throughout the day.

While schools were closed, for some reason all the 'cram schools' were doing a roaring trade! While kindergartens were due to close, ours (and I presume others too) was asked to run a skeleton staff to facilitate families, where both parents were working. This resulted in about a 75% attendance rate of kids - we were for all intents and purposes open for business.

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From my limited reading of the 'lives of the Saints', in former years when a disease or plague struck, the Church or at least some of its members were in the forefront of taking care of the sick, being with the dying and burying the dead. Those who carried out this great work became acknowledged as Saints. In this pandemic, the Churches have been, more or less, told "to keep out of the way" and let the State handle all these "good works" or 'corporal works of mercy'. The new saints for the most part are the health workers of all and no religion. Of course, there were individuals like the elderly priest who refused to use a ventilator so a young person could be treated instead, but for the most part, it seems the Church as institution was very much sidelined.

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In Korea, the Church's involvement in health services is limited. I think that this pandemic probably showed the Churches as being on the fringes of society rather than at the centre, (I am not talking about identifying with those at the fringes) The Church looked like an organisation that could be done without; when all the issues and problems of the pandemic were dealt with it could return to its meetings and rituals with certain restrictions – gone will be the days of 'mass (in terms of size) events'.

On Jeju, we are enjoying the cleaner air and reduced pollution as well as the freer roads due to lack of tourists coming to the island. This of course has financial and social repercussions for those depending on tourism for their income.

In Isidore, we have had to temporarily close two projects: the retreat house and the youth education centre. While we are paying full wages to the staff (70% of which the government will refund), this cannot continue indefinitely. We must evaluate the roles of these projects for the new reality. On the other side the farm, feed mill, kindergarten, hospice and nursing home are still providing needed services and employment, which will become even more important as the country (and the island) tries to find an alternative economic development model; it seems improbable that we can continue with the BC model.

The pandemic raises a huge number of issues for the Church and Society and, I think, we should be proactive in deciding the future direction rather than waiting to see what happens and allow 'the powers that be' try to return (probably unsuccessfully) to the before-COVID systems and structures. I think it is a "*Kairos*" moment for Church and Society.

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