

Reflections on Covid-19 from St. Patrick's College Maynooth

Living under Lockdown - The Upper Room Experience – by John-Paul Sheridan

As I sat in my kitchen on that Sunday morning in March, I was trying to figure out what I was supposed to do on a Sunday morning if not celebrate mass. How was I going to be a priest for my parishioners? What am I, if not one who ministers? I finished my coffee and put my thinking cap on. I figured out a way to celebrate online and by the time the following Sunday rolled round, I began to celebrate mass in my office in the presbytery – my time in the Upper Room had begun.

The Upper Room became the focus of operations. My day began with the celebration of the Eucharist. It was spiritual nourishment for parishioners and me, but also for some sense of a timetable and order as one day followed the next. In the late morning, I could have class, answer students' queries, grant extensions, or review class work and essay drafts sent by email. At least once a week I would share a virtual coffee-break with colleagues using the Microsoft Teams videoconference.

Since 2017 I have been in the position of teaching at Maynooth and well as the parish priest of Annacurra, nestled in the Wicklow Hills. A blended ministry of teaching and parish has been a joy these past three years. Normally it would involve time spent in both places during the week. Now I was isolated and confined to the presbytery.

The social isolation proved easy enough initially. I don't mind my own company. I had a library of books. Netflix, and a kitchen shelf full of cookbooks. What I discovered very quickly was that it's no fun cooking for yourself and binge-watching is not good for you or your sleep. I'm lucky to have a beautiful wood nearby, which I finally became familiar with. However, again it's much nicer to walk with another person to pass the time. In the end, podcasts were good company.

My first adventures in online teaching went well. I began by adding audio to existing PowerPoints and posting them on Moodle. I gave lectures online through Microsoft Teams. The one thing that killed me about the whole process both in teaching and celebrating mass online was not being able to see people. Early on, I asked parishioners to say hello when they

came online. As long as I knew they were there, I could imagine their faces. Some parishioners even attended mass virtually during walks in the Wicklow Mountains.

Lecturing was different. Nearly all the students left their cameras off. It meant I was lecturing to an empty screen. They were there but were they there? I was fearful that they were less engaged than they can sometimes be in the lecture hall. I wasn't enjoying this at all. It would get better and with the college beginning Blended Learning training for faculty members there was hope for the future.

In the meantime, I had plenty to keep me academically busy: the herculean task of corrections. Between all my lecture modules from the second semester I had about four hundred scripts to review and correct – ranging from 300-word reflections to 3000-word essays, and a host of assigned classwork of varying sizes and lengths. There's only one way to consume an elephant; consistently, and with one spoonful at a time.

With all the corrections done, I sat to write a farewell letter to my fourth year Froebel students. It is tough to sever ties with just a letter. We have seen each other in class every year, and I've watched them grow and develop into enthusiastic and committed student teachers. It was sad not to wave them off the premises, but I hope our paths will cross at some stage.

First we teach them and then we watch them leave.

Rev. Dr. John-Paul Sheridan is Director of Education Programmes in the Faculty of Theology at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth and also Parish Priest of Annacurra, Co. Wicklow.



