

Christmas 2020 letter from Fr Tony Kennedy SM

Casa di Maria, Marist International Theologate, Rome

It has been a strange year. Fortunately I am well and so are the rest of the community here in Rome.

When the year began I had a number of plans about the year. They all got cancelled like it was for most of the world.

On Ash Wednesday I celebrated 3 liturgies with the local high school below us. At that time we had received the news that an area in the north of Italy had been shut down and there were not able to receive the ashes in Milan. About a week later we got the news that all schools and universities were closing and moving to online learning. Some of the seminarians were delighted. Our cooks were worried. Then came the news that all Masses were being cancelled in Italy. And the lockdown began.

We were 19 in the community at that time. Larry Duffy, had just left for France for a month at La Neyliere. He never returned until the middle of May – 7 weeks later than had been planned.

Each day classes continued in varying forms online. Some lecturers managed the transition well. Others struggled. We were very dependent on the reliability of the internet. There were some problems but we got through.

Some people didn't leave the house for many weeks. Others were keen to go shopping for the community. We are lucky to have a small supermarket straight across the road. We could see if there was much of a queue waiting to enter and were able to choose our time. You had to carry a form with the reason for being outside the house clearly indicated. All shops except food places and chemists were closed. People had to work from home if possible. The police were very visible enforcing the rules.

The bottom few levels of our building are occupied by a school and then there is a floor with some Italian Marists along with three members of our community. Then there is our main level with seventeen of us and then the roof with a bit of a gym and the laundry. Luckily we have been using the larger chapel in the school and were able to spread out.

We joined with people in singing from the windows in the beginning. There was a sort of morbid curiosity in checking each evening about the case numbers and deaths in Italy.

By the middle of May it was possible to move around in Rome – while keeping your distance. I had a few longer walks, the city was empty. You needed to wear a mask in shops and on public transport. In June the students began their end of year exams. Most of these happened online. However some were able to be done in the university at a distance. Slowly the country was opening up. Some students had finished their courses and were due to return home. So many flights were booked and then cancelled and then rebooked. No one left on time. Plans had to change again and again.

Normally in the summer most of our community travel. Some finish their time with us, new people usually arrive and others go for pastoral and holiday experiences. Normally our house is closed at that time. Not this year! At one stage during the lockdown I wondered if anyone was going to be

able to get away at all. We had nine students and two priests who were supposed to be leaving. One of those students is continuing his studies in Rome and one priest is still here too. Returning to the Pacific is very difficult at the moment.

I did manage to get away for a bit of a break. I spent a week in Castiglion Fiorentino, one of our Italian Marist parishes near Florence in late July. I had been there a few years ago. When I visited Florence I was amazed how few people were around and the numbers of people asking for help. I look like a tourist and there were very few of them around. I then spent two weeks in France near Lyon at La Neyliere revisiting some familiar places. I had been there for many months in 2017. I returned to Rome in mid-August. As I left France some restrictions were returning as the case numbers were on the rise again.

Two new students, Carlos and Clinton, arrived at the end of August and they were learning Italian via Zoom classes. We had final profession for Charles and Hayden in early October – a very subdued affair compared to last year when there were seven. There could be no reception afterwards. The restrictions were increasing again. Classes resumed at the universities and the schools. There were limits on how many students could be present and the possibility of attending online was always there. I did a few religion classes in the high school below. And then the second wave returned. The numbers grew dramatically.

Once again all schools and universities moved online – but this time the universities were more prepared. Our internet had improved as well. Unlike the first lockdown we could still move around Rome – always wearing a mask and trying to keep your distance. There is now a nightly curfew from 10 pm to 5 am and the bars and restaurants have to close at 6 pm.

We managed to have the diaconate ordinations of Charles and Hayden in late November. Once again no party afterwards and very few people with us.

It is only now getting colder and the mountains in the distance are covered with fresh snow.

There are new restrictions for the Christmas break. The government is very worried about a third wave of cases. There will be no midnight mass this year in Italy nor in many other countries. I will be celebrating one of the masses in the parish on Christmas Eve as I did last year. Usually after Christmas we travel to different parts of Italy for a few days. Not this year. There is no travel between regions allowed from 20th December to 6th January. For most of that time the restrictions will be much as they were at the beginning of the year – only allowed out of the house once a day for work, shopping, health matters or exercise. And you need to carry a form indicating all this information. Being Italy a valid reason for being out of your home is going to church – but the nearest one to your residence.

I hope to return to Australia for the coming European summer. That depends on a lot of things. International travel is fraught with many difficulties at the moment. Who knows what restrictions will be in place then.

My family are still well in Australia. Mum and Dad are okay and are still on the farm though slowing down a bit more each year. My sister and brothers and their families are ok. Fortunately the terrible drought of the last few years broke. There has been a fair bit of rain in recent weeks, in fact there has

been more this December than the 12 months of 2019. It will all look very green this year. A big contrast to last year when the drought and bushfires dominated life.

Merry Christmas

Tony