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Capuchin Franciscan Sister Maria Elena Romero, in this undated photo at the Veronica Giuliani Monastery in Wilmington, Del., entered the life of a cloistered nun in 1983 when she joined the order of St. Clare. Though many are struggling with limiting contact with others as the world deals with COVID-19, this can be a time for spiritual opportunity, she said. (CNS/Rhina Guidos)



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People often telephone Sr. Maria Elena Romero, a Capuchin Franciscan Poor Clare in Wilmington, Delaware, to ask for her to pray for a personal intention, to sound out a problem, sometimes just to cry.

But lately, she's received a phone call or two with a different kind of problem: boredom.

As people around the world are asked to work from home, limit their contact with others and introduce "social distancing" into their vocabulary and lives, the sheltering in place authorities are asking the public to observe is causing some to go stir crazy.

But for Romero, limiting contact with the world is a part of life she observes as a cloistered nun. That means that like the other dozen or so sisters who live in her Capuchin Franciscan community in Wilmington, she only leaves the confines of the Veronica Giuliani monastery for limited reasons, such as a doctor's appointment.

When it comes to limiting contact with the outside world, she's kind of an expert, you might say.

Her advice for those struggling with the current reality of staying in place? First, make a schedule, she said.

"If you're idle, of course you're going to get bored," she said in a March 16 telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

The day at the monastery for the Wilmington Poor Clares begins at 5 a.m. when they make their bed, get dressed for the day, then head to the chapel for prayer at 5:30 a.m. Though most may not want to get up at this hour, it's a good idea to set a regular time to get up, start the day with prayer, give thanks, then organize work that needs to be done that day.

Some would be surprised, but life inside a monastery is pretty packed with activity. Though the day revolves around a scheduled set of prayers, there are clothes and dishes to be washed, meals for 12 to prepare, finances to sort, food and supplies that need to be ordered or purchased. Each sister is assigned a chore to tackle.

Likewise, at home, she said, make a list of chores or responsibilities that need to be accomplished that day and dole them out: whether it's working from home, doing homework, or cleaning or fixing things. For those who don't have other responsibilities, assign a productive chore for yourself or others, to stay busy until lunchtime.

A family member can be assigned to prepare lunch for others or each person can take up a different task: set the table, load the dishwasher or help the person cooking to clean as lunch is prepared.

People often complain that they don't have enough time for family. Lunch as family, a novelty for many, can be a great opportunity to catch up with how children, spouses or another family member are dealing with confinement, to see how other family members are feeling and whether they can help others cope.

After lunch, families, much like the nuns at the monastery, can collectively help with washing the dishes as a group and to put things away before the afternoon begins. The period after lunch can be used to rest, to read, to check in with friends or co-workers by phone, she said.

Romero said she has suggested to those who tell her that they're struggling with boredom to be creative about prayer. If the home where a person lives has a patio or a yard, use the afternoon or lunch hour to eat outside or play relaxing music outdoors and meditate or pray in a garden or patio.



Discalced Carmelite Sisters Mary Grace Melchior, Marianna So, Marie Cecile Franer, Susanna Choi and Christine Rosencrans kneel in prayer at the Carmelite Monastery of St. Joseph in Terre Haute, Ind., during an Oct. 10, 2015, Mass to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the birth of St. Teresa of Avila, foundress of their order. Though many are struggling with limiting contact with others as the world deals with COVID-19, this can be a time for spiritual opportunity, a Capuchin Franciscan sister said. (CNS/The Criterion/Sean Gallagher)

"Changing your setting always helps, find a place to be alone and that always helps to clear your head," she said.

If that's a struggle, the internet, via YouTube, offers many learning opportunities, including instruction on how to pray the rosary, she said.

A lot of people tell her how they never learned specific prayers or to pray the rosary, so "I tell them this is your opportunity," she said. Time also can be used for self-reflection, to ask oneself whether they've wronged others and to seek forgiveness, to examine fears or to make a plan of how to help someone else who might be

struggling – even if it's just through a phone call.

After a bit of rest, prayer or meditation, return to work or chores, she said.

The time before dinner for the sisters includes a longer period of prayer, sometimes accompanied by reading as a community, then meditation, ending with prayer, then dinner, cleaning up, followed by what some call social time or recreation time. For the Poor Clares, this can be used as a time to build community — an important aspect for any group who lives together.

Families can do much like the sisters and cook and clean up together, have a longer time to interact and check in, then play cards or board games, take part in physical activity by walking in the yard together, watch a movie or read. A family or a person can use the time to learn a new skill, including making crafts, call a friend or contact a person who might be lonely or family members they haven't contacted in a while, or assess whether they can be of help to the community and plan how to do that.

As the day heads into its last part, the sisters gather together to pray once again as a community, giving thanks to God for the day that has passed, asking for a good night's rest.

Though it's good to keep informed, Romero suggested that people carve out quiet time before bed, listen to music or pray or meditate, whatever it takes to get themselves out of the anxiety caused in a time of uncertainty, she said.

She suggested that people take themselves mentally out of the "coronavirus environment," especially if it's causing anxiety.

"Light a candle and meditate," she said. "This is a great time to ask for forgiveness, to look inside the self and cleanse the soul."

Many have complained to her in the past that they never have time, "but here it is," she said.

"This can be a time for blessings," she said. "But you have to take advantage of it, to see the good side of it, and then it can be a blessed time, a time to ask for mercy, to give thanks, to think about others, to reflect."

And if nothing else, then "just ask God for mercy," she said, "but it's Lent, we're in a time of reflection and ask God for those things that only heaven can provide us."

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