How to Survive Quarantine, According to a Nun

A lifestyle of silence and solitude has helped women of the cloth navigate the Covid-19 lockdown

By Leigh Giangreco

Illustration: Daniel Zender
On a rolling, leafy property a few miles outside of Baltimore, more than a dozen women are cloistered inside their home. Confinement is a liberal word for their way of life; they operate within 26 acres of fairy-tale grounds, which include a Tudor house, stone walls, and tulip gardens. They perform all their daily activities here, eat their meals together, and rarely leave. During this pandemic, that’s not so unusual. But when the stay-at-home order eventually lifts in Maryland and everyone huddles nervously in bars and parks, these Carmelite nuns will remain inside, just as their community has since 1790.

“It’s the perfect place to be in lockdown because that’s the life we live anyway,” said Sister Judy Murray, a 72-year-old nun at the Carmelite Sisters of Baltimore in Towson, Maryland.

The Carmelites are an order of Roman Catholic nuns who, unlike millions of Americans stuck at home during the coronavirus pandemic, have chosen a cloistered life. They devote each day to prayer and quiet contemplation, with scheduled breaks to tend the garden and the monastery. Rules for leaving the grounds vary by community; some monasteries have their groceries delivered while other nuns are free to shop on their own, visit the doctor, or even vote.
“We’re cloistered, but we have a modern understanding of what that means,” Murray said. “We definitely don’t allow people into the private side of our monastery, and we go out but we go out for important things.”

I’ve been familiar with cloistered life since I was a child. Growing up in Buffalo, New York, my mother would take me every few weeks after school to say prayers at the Carmelite’s chapel at the Monastery of the Little Flower of Jesus just north of the city. The monastery was where my mother could relieve herself of the burdens of adulthood. Pleas for success in marriage or careers, entreaties for sick loved ones, and special intentions for newborn children were whispered in the chapel and deposited in the convent’s “turn,” a large, wooden, lazy-Susan where nuns could receive intentions or gifts without seeing visitors.

For a child with a tenuous grasp on religion, the monastery was less of a religious refuge than a mysterious castle. I wondered how the nuns endured years inside this small citadel sandwiched inside a city block. I remember the eerie calm of the cool, dark chapel on a warm afternoon, with its creaky pews and metal grate separating the nuns from lay attendants. As I got older, I grew skeptical of the Carmelite’s mission. The mythic and medieval life of cloistered nuns seemed obsolete in a world that begged for hands-on help in
soup kitchens and shelters. Praying behind walls could only go so far.

Yet now I find myself hyperventilating inside the encroaching interior of my home while the outside world falls apart. I’m lucky to have roommates, otherwise I’d be experiencing total isolation. When we’re not hanging out or drinking together, I bury myself in work to try to forget about the chaos surrounding me. I FaceTime with my three-month-old nephew who lives 700 miles away and who I still haven’t met yet. I try to block out reality by marathoning old TV shows like *Veep*.

So I wonder, what wisdom might be gained from a life confined within a set of walls? Who better to ask, of course, than a nun?

A physician assistant by training, Sister Murray joined the monastery at age 35 in 1983 after working at a medical clinic in downtown Washington, D.C. She first discovered the Carmelites as a child, when she picked up Thomas Merton’s 1955 book *No Man Is an Island*. Merton had mentioned the 16th-century Carmelite reformers St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Ávila, who returned the order to a more austere life that eschewed social interaction. When she came across a book about St. John and St.
Teresa again in college, Murray devoted herself more seriously to daily prayer and mass.

“I probably grew up nominally Catholic, but I found that I was always attracted to Catholicism and my faith,” she said. “As an adult, I really wanted to put together contemplative prayer, simple lifestyle, and social justice.”

Shifting into the cloistered life wasn’t difficult for her. As a young adult in the 1970s, Sister Murray was an avid backpacker, a pastime that eased her into a lifestyle of silence and solitude. As a physician, she would sometimes feel the pull to return to the outside world, especially in response to a natural disaster, though she feels differently now during the ongoing pandemic. “My first responsibility is here on the medical team. I’m such a rusty scupper when it comes to medicine I would be more of a liability than an asset.”

Established in the late 18th century, the Carmelite Sisters of Baltimore are one of the oldest communities of religious women in the U.S. But 13 sisters live a modern life, dressing in lay clothes rather than the veiled frock worn by St. Teresa. Their long-standing confinement mirrors that of many Americans today: They only leave for necessities like grocery trips and doctor appointments.
“Silence is not a vacuum; silence is a reality.”

Little changed inside the order when Gov. Larry Hogan enacted a statewide stay-at-home order on March 30. (“The great advantage is we were already set up for that, and so we had the systems in place,” Sister Murray said.) The monastery has tweaked some logistics, like designating runners for essential trips.

“You preserve the people who can carry your country forward,” she said. “We’re especially careful of our younger people because they’re the ones who would go forward. We’re also careful of our older people because we don’t want them getting infected or vulnerable. It’s the middle people who do the running so as to protect the younger and the older.”

Only the daily Catholic mass has shifted since Covid. With priests unable to visit the monastery to lead the service, the sisters have filled that time with prayer. It’s a crucial piece of Murray’s day that she misses, but one she acknowledges won’t change under existing rules barring women from the priesthood.

“We live in a patriarchal world,” she said. “The Church changes at a very slow rate, it’s a geological change. I can hope there will be change but right now that’s not the case. Maybe that will break something open, maybe that’s the silver lining in this cloud.”
Sister Mary, prioress at the Carmelite Nuns of the Assumption in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, grew up in a town just north of Buffalo, not far from where I lived. She entered religious life almost 40 years ago at the age of 24. Before joining the monastery, she went to college and worked in a chemistry research laboratory for a few years. Besides adjusting to living with all women after growing up with three brothers, she didn’t find the change from working in the outside world to an enclosed space difficult.

“The transition for me was like coming home,” she said. “It’s the same thing in any relationship if you’re living with a bunch of other people — you have to work through those relationships every day.”

Life in confinement with eight other nuns isn’t claustrophobic for the 62-year-old prioress. While some Carmelites follow strict schedules, codes of silence and guidelines that limit their media consumption to Catholic newspapers or books, the nuns in Latrobe are free to talk as needed and use the internet. There is no music constantly playing in the background or ambient noise in the monastery, just the quiet hum of diligent work.
“The peaceful silence comes out of being at peace within yourself,” she said. “Silence is not a vacuum; silence is a reality. People treat it as a vacuum that has to be filled.”

“You have to be at peace with yourself to spend that kind of time with yourself.”

Their day starts around 4 or 5 a.m., with seven hours of prayer plus the daily responsibilities of running the house. Over the years, the nuns have grown increasingly self-sufficient; they take care of their own carpentry, plumbing, and computer repairs. For her part, Sister Mary has become the monastery’s IT expert after she took apart and rewired a computer several years ago. When they can’t invite an outside expert to fix something, they roll up their sleeves and find a tutorial on YouTube.

“We chose this life. Everybody else has been forced into it,” she said, drawing a distinction between her vocation and those living under a stay-at-home order. “But I think you could turn that around and just embrace reality the way it is and not fight against it. You have to have a reason to get up in the morning, so if you don’t have one when something like this happens you have to discover what this is.”
I imagined that life behind closed doors would convert anyone into a somber servant of god. Instead, Sister Mary’s shy demeanor in her youth developed into a candid and gregarious sense of humor at the monastery that has helped her live with others.

“For me it’s a kind of a long-standing choice that I try to make, just to accept what’s coming at me,” she said.

Interviewing these nuns in the days preceding and following Easter, I was struck by their adamant hope and cheerfulness. When news from the pandemic seems dark and relentless, I find myself ruminating on the diverging paths of two disciples on Good Friday, which marks Jesus’ crucifixion and one of the most solemn days on the Catholic calendar. There are some Sundays when I open my laptop, stream mass, and find comfort in the familiar scripture readings that I have heard year after year. But there are many more days where I can’t muster the strength, spiritually or mentally, to fight the suffocating despair and anxiety.

The nuns receive daily intentions through phone calls, emails, and letters, often asking them to pray for sick family members. I asked them how they absorb the weight of these petitions without giving into sorrow.
“It’s heartbreaking to hear some of the things that people are going through,” Sister Mary said. “But in the end what we’re called to do is lift that up before God. So we know we’re not the ones who have the answers, we’re just asking for His mercy.”

I had assumed that the Carmelites were well prepared for the emotional burdens of the stay-at-home order. It’s a mandate to end mass consumption and disconnect from society, rules that the nuns follow every day. But there’s no pure place to live, not even inside a monastery. The outside world still intrudes and those who have devoted themselves to a spiritual life don’t have the answers to an unprecedented pandemic.

“I don’t think we’re supposed to have a handle on it, I think we’re supposed to grow in trust,” Sister Mary said. “When things get more chaotic and more crazy then it’s a call to deeper trust, not a call to trying to grab the reins, that’s our natural human reaction.”

It’s heartening to hear from those who have thrived within an enclosed community. Knowing that the Carmelites don’t have divine insight into the pandemic, that they fix their own plumbing, test their patience with several housemates, and spend some of their free time watching Greta Gerwig’s Little Women has cast off some of the mystery that captivated me as a child. In its place, I see a reflection of our own lives: a secular call to stop, consume less, and be brave enough to sit with ourselves.
“You have to be at peace with yourself to spend that kind of time with yourself,” Sister Murray said. “This is an opportunity to get to know yourself in a different way if you have never done that. It’s maybe something we’ve lost in our culture that we think that in order to have value we have to be doing something, but in fact each person has value just by the nature of their being.”