

## Lockdown: A Poem



Our journalist interviews an Irish Capuchin friar whose poem-meditation on the lockdown has gone viral.

By Sarah MacDonald

*Yes, THERE is even death.  
But there can always be a  
rebirth of love.*

*Wake to the choices you  
make as to how to live now.*

*Today, breathe.*

These are just a few lines from a poem titled Lockdown by a Capuchin Franciscan friar which went viral during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Brother Richard Hendrick penned it in response to what was emerging in China and Italy about Coronavirus as Ireland was heading into lockdown in mid-March. It tapped into the collective zeitgeist, resonating with people's sense of fragility and provided an uplifting alternative view of the 'new normal'. Though people were 'staying apart' during the lockdown, they remained connected virtually, and the poem became for many a shared virtual moment of reflection.

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### Going Nova

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Speaking to the Messenger of Saint Anthony, 46 year old Brother Richard from Dublin explained that the seeds of the poem were 'filtering around my head as I was praying, and then the first couple of words of the poem came to me. This was one of those poems that just seemed to arrive from somewhere else wholly made in one piece. I wrote it in one great flow and posted it on my Facebook page, and then went to bed and forgot all about it. When I woke up the following morning it had gone nova! It just spoke to peoples' hearts.' Overnight, it had been shared from his Facebook page 10,000 times. When I spoke to him this had risen to 46,000 shares on Facebook and over half a million shares on Twitter. It has since featured on the BBC and CNN and in a host

of newspapers, as well as being translated into 15 languages and shared by celebrities like Arianna Huffington and Alex Baldwin.

'I've received thousands of emails and messages. The poem has been turned into an orchestral piece in Berlin, a world renowned cartoonist is making an animation in New York, and it has been turned into a crowd sourced film with 200 film-makers from all over the world contributing to a movie based on their experience of lockdown in their own countries, with my poem as a commentary on it. I call it my little poem with the long legs because it has just taken off across the world and it keeps coming back to me from different places'.

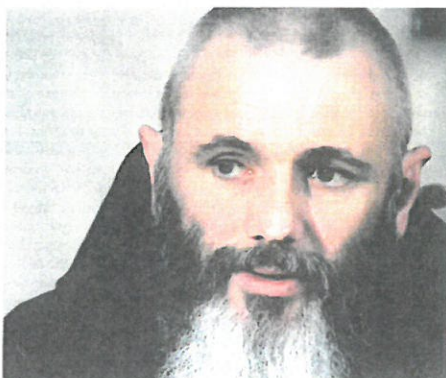


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## Contemplative tradition

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Brother Richard Hendrick is a priest-friar of the Irish Capuchin Franciscan Province. For over 20 years he has worked to raise greater awareness of the insights of the Christian contemplative tradition. He has written a number of books including one aimed at introducing young people to meditation and reflection. 'I think that people are extremely hungry for reflection; sometimes they are hungry for it and they don't even know what it is they are hungry for. Very often people will feel that there is a missing dimension in their life. We live in a world that exalts 'doing' over 'being' and what tends to happen is that people put huge amounts of effort and energy into their career or building a family or travelling or simply enjoying life as much as they can. Then they discover that behind all of those worthy things there is still a hunger. That is the hunger that St Augustine famously spoke of when he said, 'God has made us for himself and our hearts are empty until they feast on him.'



*Br Richard Hendrik is a priest-friar of the Irish Capuchin Franciscan Province*

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## Early vocation

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Brother Richard entered the Capuchin novitiate in 1992 and took first vows in 1993. Perpetual vows followed in 1998, and he was ordained in 2001. 'I have been in the Capuchin Order since I was 17 – that's about 28 years at this stage. I entered directly after secondary school, which was rare enough in those days and is completely gone now. I had been fairly certain from the age of 14/15 that the Capuchins were where I was heading for. My Franciscan vocation was born out of two things. First and foremost, Padre Pio. I had been reading about him, and he fascinated me. But there was also my devotion to St Anthony, which I still have to this day. It was through St Anthony that I came to St Francis.'

Prior to deciding to enter the Order, Brother Richard, who hails from Dublin, had been interested in studying zoology in college, but 'St Francis captured me with his vision of the natural world as a kind of icon of creation and the divine. It just triggered something within me, and I got in touch with the Capuchins and went to visit them. That was really the beginning of it; I never really looked back from there.'

While working in youth ministry, Brother Richard became passionate about bringing the Gospel and the tradition of the Church to young people in a Franciscan spirit using the contemplative

tradition of the Church. He was also one of the founders of the hugely successful Dublin Gospel Choir, which was launched in 1996 and has been 'going strong ever since.' Though he is not directly involved in it anymore, because as a Capuchin he has moved around different friaries from Dublin to Co Donegal, he is still nominally the choir's spiritual adviser. 'It runs itself at this stage. It is a choir of about 50 and it has a huge waiting list of people who want to join it. The choir performs in both sacred and secular settings – everything from the Electric Picnic Festival to the Mass in the Capuchin friary in Dublin's Church Street.'

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## Love of music

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Brother Richard describes music as 'a huge thread in my life. I think music is one of



the universal languages of the spirit in which we commune with something far deeper because it comes from the unconscious. The Holy Spirit uses it to enlighten and illuminate people who may otherwise be closed off to



more traditional ways. St Francis himself asked that the Brothers would sing not just the hymns of the Church, but also of the secular songs of the time – the love songs of the troubadours – and address them to God. He felt it was extremely important that people could, through the music they were listening to on the streets and not just the music they were listening to in the churches and abbeys, find a path to God.’

Over the years, the Capuchin friar has also been involved in hospital chaplaincy and prison chaplaincy. He was a chaplain at the Dochas women’s prison in Mountjoy in Dublin, and also in the training unit in Wheatfield prison in Dublin, which prepares prisoners for life after release. The prisoners ‘had come from a situation of neglect and often abuse. People don’t end up in prison because they choose that life, people end up in prison because they are a victim. Unfortunately, they may have made other victims, but I think the understanding that prison chaplaincy gave me is that everybody has a story, and when you hear somebody’s story, you realise they are just like any of us. We play the hand of cards that we have been dealt the best we can. And sometimes the conditions and circumstances that people were brought up in are hugely influential – that is not to take away from moral choice. But you become aware that underneath the label of the criminal *per se* or the

offender *per se* there is always a wounded human being. The Franciscan vision is to see Christ in the leper. Very often the prisoner is a leper to society in ways that they really feel particularly those who are doing their best to fix and amend their lives and recognise their mistakes.’

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### Time to reflect

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Currently, Brother Richard is Guardian of the Capuchin friary in Raheny in Dublin, where the Order’s formation house in Ireland is located. When I spoke to him, all the Capuchin students were in Oxford studying. But that doesn’t mean Brother Richard has loads of free time. The friar is a chaplain at St Francis hospice, and combines this role with his courses in Christian contemplation at the Sanctuary Centre in Dublin, which was founded in 1998 by Sr Stan Kennedy, the renowned campaigner on homelessness.

‘I think one of the things people very often are missing at the moment is the time and the space and the tools to reflect properly. We live in a very fast, busy and intense society. The Sanctuary was founded by Sr Stan to provide an urban retreat centre for people to take time and space, but also to come into contact with meditation, mindfulness and contemplative prayer. All of these are tools that we can use to expand the reflective

life and deepen our awareness of the presence of God.’

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### Pebble in the pool

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As to this poem, Lockdown, he admits, ‘It has been quite a moment,’ before adding, ‘I am just glad that it is speaking to people and that it has given them an awareness of the Franciscan tradition; the poem very solidly comes out of that and out of a life of prayer, thankfully.’ He is generous rather than proprietorial about his creative output. ‘When people ask me about poetry, I often say that a poem isn’t mine, but it comes through me. I think a poem is not something you own, at least in the Franciscan sense – we don’t own anything, but I think all you do is throw the pebble in the pool of human consciousness and human awareness, and hopefully the ripples are ripples of goodness and compassion. *Lockdown* seems to be doing that, and for that I am very grateful.’



*St Mary of the Angel's Church in Church Street, Dublin, belongs to the city's Capuchin friary*

*Lockdown – the Poem by the Irish Capuchin Friar, Brother Richard Hendrick, written on 13 March 2020, that went viral – and is the subject of the article overleaf*

*Yes there is fear.  
Yes there is isolation.  
Yes there is panic buying.  
Yes there is sickness.  
Yes there is even death.*

*But,  
They say that in Wuhan after so many  
years of noise  
You can hear the birds again.  
They say that after just a few weeks of  
quiet  
The sky is no longer thick with fumes  
But blue and grey and clear.  
They say that in the streets of Assisi  
People are singing to each other  
across the empty squares,  
keeping their windows open  
so that those who are alone  
may hear the sounds of family around  
them.*

*They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland  
Is offering free meals and delivery to the  
housebound.  
Today a young woman I know  
is busy spreading fliers with her number  
through the neighbourhood  
So that the elders may have someone to  
call on.  
Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques  
and Temples  
are preparing to welcome  
and shelter the homeless, the sick, the  
weary  
All over the world people are slowing  
down and reflecting  
All over the world people are looking at  
their neighbours in a new way*

*All over the world people are waking up to  
a new reality  
To how big we really are.  
To how little control we really have.  
To what really matters.  
To Love.*

*So we pray and we remember that  
Yes there is fear.  
But there does not have to be hate.  
Yes there is isolation.  
But there does not have to be loneliness.  
Yes there is panic buying.  
But there does not have to be meanness.  
Yes there is sickness.  
But there does not have to be disease of the  
soul  
Yes there is even death.  
But there can always be a rebirth of love.  
Wake to the choices you make as to how to  
live now.*

*Today, breathe.  
Listen, behind the factory noises of your  
panic  
The birds are singing again  
The sky is clearing,  
Spring is coming,  
And we are always encompassed by Love.  
Open the windows of your soul  
And though you may not be able  
to touch across the empty square,  
Sing.*