

Fr Jim Martin SJ - Five Spiritual Tips To Help You Avoid Pandemic Despair

Everyone is sick of the pandemic and tired of hearing about Covid. When I turn on the radio in the morning, the first word that I hear is always “Covid,” “coronavirus” or “pandemic.” It is hard to escape. So I am going to keep this short.

I am also not going to try to sugarcoat anything or talk too much about “silver linings.” The pandemic is a terrible reality that we must all face, and one that does not seem to be going away any time soon. It is by turns frightening, maddening, annoying, depressing and angering. In addition to the obvious health challenges it poses—especially to the immunocompromised and to frontline workers—it is emotionally brutal.

But it is not hopeless. I have found in my own life, and in counseling others, a few tips drawn from Christian spirituality that have helped me avoid despair. Here are five.

Be smart.

The most important tip may not sound especially spiritual, but it is: Get vaccinated and boosted if you are able to. Wear a mask. Maintain social distances when you need to. Avoid large indoor gatherings especially when there are spikes, and if you are infected with Covid-19, by all means stay home.

There is nothing wrong with asking for help. People do it in the Gospels all the time.

As I said, this sounds like practical advice, but at heart it is spiritual advice. (Spiritual and practical usually go hand in hand.) It is not only about caring for yourself and your own health, but also about caring for others. It’s about reverencing them. As Pope Francis has said, getting vaccinated is an “act of love.” To be blunter than the pope: Life is not just about you. We have to begin with this tip, because it will help you (and others) survive.

Caring for yourself also may mean speaking with a therapist, a spiritual director or a trusted friend to help you navigate your way through the pandemic. There is nothing wrong with asking for help. People do it in the Gospels all the time.

Be hopeful.

St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, often talked about the “good spirit” and the “evil spirit,” which we can define broadly as the impulses that move us toward God, and those that move us away from God. And for those trying to lead good lives, says St. Ignatius, the good spirit will encourage us, console us and uplift us. The spirit that is not coming from God, by contrast, will cast us down, discourage us and cause “gnawing anxiety.” (Is there a better phrase for what we have all been feeling during the last two years?)

Hope is coming from God; despair is not.

This is the piece of advice I have used most frequently—for myself or in offering it to others—during the pandemic: Hope is coming from God; despair is not. Any time you hear within yourself (or hear from other people) voices saying, “This is hopeless,” “I’m doomed” or “I can’t handle this,” know that it is not coming from God. (At one point during the pandemic a friend said, “This will kill us all,” which I told him was definitely not coming from God.) Conversely, listen to the voices that say, “There is always hope,” “I’m not alone” and “I can handle this.” Follow the hope, not the despair.

Be loving.

Over the last two years, I have been quarantined several times in my Jesuit community, as a result of some Covid- positive community members. It is not a surprise in a house of 12 men! So I have often felt, like many people, powerless to help others. But there is always something we can do to help lighten someone's emotional load, if not their viral load.

Remember that Jesus did not heal or console everyone in Galilee or Judea. He dealt with the one person in front of him.

If your mobile or computer is working, you can always contact someone who is more frightened or lonely than you are. You would be surprised how much a phone call, email, text or—heaven forbid—a snail mail note or card, can help someone feel more hopeful. (Flowers are nice too.) You do not need a lot of money (or an advanced degree or special training) to help someone. Just getting someone to laugh can be an act of love.

You cannot help everyone, but you can help that one person. Remember that Jesus did not heal or console everyone in Galilee or Judea. He dealt with the one person in front of him. Be like Jesus.

Be monastic.

Every day I wake up and, since I'm no longer going into the office, I look at the same four walls in my relatively small room. And the view out my window is not any great shakes either. My window looks onto an alleyway and the brick-faced sides of several buildings. I can see about three inches of sky. And of course I'm not traveling anywhere these days, like most people. Early on, I said to a therapist, "Am I going to go crazy if I never leave New York City?" She laughed and said, "You won't even go crazy if you never leave your room."

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One day I woke up, stared out my window and realized, Wait a minute. Monks have done this for centuries. And if they can do it, so can I. Admittedly, few of us live in beautiful monasteries in sylvan settings (neither do I), but we all can try to find God in the everyday tasks, even if they seem, on the surface, boring. A great deal of this is noticing, and appreciating, even the smallest moments of grace.

A few years ago I saw the film "Into Great Silence," about the quiet lives of the monks in La Grande Chartreuse, the Carthusian monastery in France, who did the same tasks every single day. For decades. In one scene, a monk simply ate a piece of fruit as he stared out the door of his cell. To some extent, we're all monks now. And all of us, especially now, are called to try to find God even in the mundane. I think about that guy eating fruit a lot these days.

Be prayerful.

At the very beginning of the pandemic, an elderly Jesuit in our community said to us during his homily, "Well, we're always hoping for more time to pray, and now we've got it!" I know that this reality is far different for some people—say, families with young children, where many parents feel that they have less time and a more constricted space, with the kids at home.

But for many people, the lack of a commute, a pause in social gatherings and almost no travel, means that they have more free time at home. As my Jesuit friend said, in the "before times" we often said, "If only I had more time for prayer and spiritual reading." Now many of us do.

So pray. Do the examen every night. Try out more contemplative prayer before your day starts; imagine yourself with Jesus and tell him how you feel about the pandemic. (I certainly have, so he probably won't be surprised when you do.) And read or reread some spiritual books that will help you find God more easily.

You can handle this. You will get through it. God is with you. See you on the other side of all this.