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Dear Oblates and Friends of the Abbey,

The reign of the virus and the work of Christ the Victor.

Christ is present, fully, actively present as he has always been. When asked if we are in fear of the school opening with all its risks, our response would be, “How could we be, He is present!” Where he is present, there is hope, where there is hope there is joy. We are not going to let COVID steal our joy and freedom in Christ even as we live out the restrictions. There is a beautiful line from Pope emeritus Benedict: “The word of God makes us change our concept of realism: the realist is the one who recognizes in the word of God the foundation of all things.” He made the virus as sure as he made us! He speaks through every creature, even his very smallest and he is doing that for us now.

He has asked his tiniest of creatures to rule our world for a while perhaps because we were not listening to him, the Creator of all things? Through this microscopic invisible servant of his, he has imposed a rule on us that has made us pause and turn in our tracks. We say that the economy has suffered, but for the first time it has had to consider putting the person and people in the forefront of its concerns. We say that individualism runs rampant but for the first time perhaps globally, we have to think about where we travel and how our movement impacts the lives of our brothers and sisters. Our wants and desires have run freely and extravagantly, but for the first time in decades, we have had to consider how to genuinely restrain our unruly desires and focus on what is essential and important for everyone. In our affluence we share our lives with others reluctantly but now the virus has forced us to share even our jobs! True, in many ways the virtual new normal before the pandemic has become even more virtual after it. But if we stop and think, it has been inspired by the need to reach out more than ever, rather than simply reach out simply for oneself. The common good is once again being reborn in the minds of many. We have learned to live more in the awareness of the other person where once we were drifting into a kind of societal impersonal anonymity. Fraternity across the globe has seen a little rise in temperature. These are the hidden blessings of the virus, given to us by the One who made it.

And that brings us to our present situation in the COVID pandemic. How has it affected the monastery? In many interesting and varied ways. But living in the presence of God what can we say COVID has done to us as a community? On the more humorous side, for the first time a good number of the monks who serve at meals in the new COVID regimen, have come to know the dietary needs of each of their confreres intimately. We would be the envy of any five-star hotel as one monk is served by about three or four or five servers at each meal! How many pancakes one takes, how many scoops of porridge another prefers, who would prefer his tea

mid-meal and who at the end is now shared knowledge. We have become more attentive to the needs of each other at meals, the deepening our mutual love and good manners! The clumsy have learned to be more delicate serving food and the delicate more bold in offering a bigger helping! We have also appreciated our time together at recreation more, knowing that the feeling of isolation even in a community can become real for the elderly if we are not attentive to the presence of each other. We have certainly felt the absence of our seminarians and guests more than ever before, but then we have also entered more deeply into that monastic calling that for many has become an unasked for enclosure. There have been more in-house meetings than ever before. We are talking with each other more than we ever have! One unpredicted health effect was the lack of the usual bouts of flu which would invade the house in the early spring. Hand washing has worked its smaller miracles.

The virus itself, too, teaches us some really profound lessons. For example, it is invisible and we cannot see it. We respond as if it is everywhere. God is invisible and God is everywhere! It is an invitation to think of God as he truly is everywhere! How near he is! It has taught us care for the individual, but at the same time the individual must constantly think of the common good of everyone who might be affected by his own carelessness. Obeying protocol has helped us unite obedience and love if we are docile to the lesson. God constantly meets us individually and in community. The common good and the individual good of humanity are inseparable, just as the unity and individuality in the Trinity is inseparable. So we have the opportunity of improving our social expression of love. The virus has taught us that safety from its possible deadly effects is important if we are to remain healthy. So also, God desires us to remain free from sin in order to remain free and healthy spiritually and alive in him.

There are some who would prefer to leave off all caution and simply put our faith in God and in the God-given power of the body's immune system. But again, our Catholic faith teaches us that we must live by both faith and reason. To abandon the one leads to superstition and to ignore the other leads to skepticism about anything improving. "What if we die?" asks faith? What is important is not whether we die of the contagion but whether we are prepared to die. "What if we die from the virus?" asks reason. Everyone must die, but it is reasonable to preserve life with precautions that are reasonable, just we do in driving and other dangerous employments.

We ask finally, when how long will its rule last? I answer, "What does it matter?" With it or without it, the present moment is given to us by Christ, to find him in every person we meet, in every circumstance that the pandemic conjures up for us, to find him in his tiniest of creatures. Then we are truly alive! Faith is life, not foolhardiness, but realism, the realism of his presence. Christ is present, fully, actively present as he has always been. This was the first degree of humility for our great patriarch, St Benedict in his Chapter Seven on humility.

With prayer in his presence,

Abbot John Braganza OSB