

North American Lay Fraternities

Letter from Fr. Lenny

National Public Radio (NPR) did an interview with an author about what they described as the radical subject of solitude, which gave me a hearty laugh. They went wild for an hour about it being psychologically dangerous but necessary for centering your life. The discussion about silence in your home or apartment gave lots of talk. It was actually a novel idea to the listeners! Noise for me is the new oncology. I often think the Good Lord Jesus is calling many people to follow him in priesthood/religious life or simple lives dedicated to serving others. But can they hear with all the outer and inner noise?

Without silence there is no listening to self, and maybe

that's the issue. People don't like what they hear about themselves in silence. Inner self rejection and self-hate are hard to digest in the midst of the ever-present Love of God, Who loves us just as we are even though we may think we are walking, thinking messes.

Enter Jesus of Nazareth. How many hours of silence did Jesus actually spend while living in noisy Nazareth for thirty years? Perhaps he experienced silence when one of the neighbors died or after the reading of the Torah in the synagogue. Thirty years is a long time to listen. It was through listening in the silence that he could hear the voice of his Father and realize that his mission was to bring the Good News to a very depressed and oppressed people.

When Charles de Foucauld returned from his exploration of Morocco, he craved silence. His dangerous

adventure was a backdrop for his life-changing confrontation with the Transcendent. On his return to Paris, he spent hours in churches not for any religious reason but just to get away from the noise. But Jesus couldn't leave him alone. It was in the silence of listening to his restless heart that his encounter with God was the unexpected result, a St. Paul moment when in an instant he was another man.

Brother Charles wrote later, "The moment I believed God existed I could live for nothing else." When he left St Augustine's Church after his confession with Fr. Huvelin, he walked directly into Nazareth. Silence was the new air that filled his 28 years old lungs.

As always you are in my prayers.

- Father Lenny



"We need this silence, this absence of every creature, so that God can build his hermitage within us."

- Charles de Foucauld



Silence

Editor's Desk

Last month my husband and I went on a hike on one of Crystal Cove State Park's backcountry trails in southern California.

Sometimes you could view the ocean but most of the time you are walking through the sage brush wilderness among the hills. This was the first time that I can remember being bothered by at least two hikers walking by with music playing from their devices. No wonder we observed very little wild life compared to other hikes we have been on!

All four writers in this issue – Bonnie Thurston, Alain Blanchette, Ciro Piccirillo, Fr. Lenny – also make similar comments within their articles as to the noisiness of today's world. They also highlight Jesus and Charles de Foucauld in their reflections on silence. There is so much to meditate on in these articles that I am already planning on re-reading them in the future!

In "Desert Ramblings" the topic of silence is

shattered by my intrusive thoughts concerning the tragedy that occurred on 8/27/25 at the Church of the Annunciation in Minneapolis. My seven-year-old granddaughter, who had just returned to southern California after residing in Ireland for three years, learned about the details of the shooting when she attended a special Mass for the victims at her Catholic school. This was the first time that my granddaughter ever heard of a mass

shooting, and so you can imagine how "freaked out" she was when she came home. When I attended Catholic school as a child, thankfully I only had to digest the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

The theme for our next issue (December, 2025) is "Blessed Mother." The deadline for submission of articles is 11/20. May you have a blessed autumn filled with silent moments!

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adoration

peace

chapel

prayer

desert

quiet

Jesus

repose

listen

sacred

meditation

serene

monastery

silence

Nazareth

still

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Do you have news or information to share? Please send an email to the editor.

Silence is Presence

Silence was the cornerstone of Brother Charles' daily life and ministry. In the heat of the Algerian desert, Brother Charles lived his last years in Tamanrasset, a small village far from the centers of power and influence. There, in a modest hermitage, he spent his days in prayer, manual work, and quiet presence among the Tuareg people. His life was outwardly uneventful. No grand sermons, no crowds. Just the silent rhythm of prayer before the tabernacle, the careful recording of the Tuareg language, the small acts of welcome to anyone who passed his door. This was his "Nazareth," a hidden life patterned after the thirty silent years of Jesus in a small town of Galilee.

Today, such a life seems almost alien. We live with constant noise, not only in the streets but in the heart and mind. News cycles refresh by the minute. Social media hums with opinions, images, and provocations. Even in moments of apparent quiet, our devices and thoughts keep tugging us outward. Silence, real silence, can feel impossible or even threatening.

For Brother Charles, silence was not the absence of activity but the condition for presence. In Nazareth he saw how Jesus lived hidden without acclaim, listening to the Father, working with his hands, loving his neighbors without fanfare. Brother Charles believed this hidden life was not wasted time but the deep root from which all mission grows. In his own desert hermitage, silence became a way to strip away distractions, to let God's voice have the first and last word. Silence in this sense is not a withdrawal from the world in contempt, but a way of being in it differently. In silence we notice what escapes us when we rush: the way light falls on a wall, the tone in a friend's voice, the pain behind a stranger's eyes. Silence allows us to listen without immediately rehearsing our reply. It trains us to receive before we act.

Yet the silence of Nazareth is never idle. It is a well from which action flows, not restless or hurried but deliberate and rooted. From this inner stillness rises a threefold movement in our daily lives to denounce, to renounce and to announce:

- We denounce not in rage but in truth. In our homes it could be refusing to join in gossip or gently questioning a joke that belittles. In our workplaces it may mean speaking up when someone is treated unfairly. In our communities it may mean standing up for the poor, marginalized, and excluded who are facing the consequences of social injustices and inequities. Silence gives us the clarity to name what wounds without becoming noise ourselves.
- We renounce the small, daily self-emptyings that create space for God... Letting go of the last word in an argument. Choosing to step back so someone else can shine. Turning off the background hum of a screen to be more present to the person across from us. This is not self-erasure but the quiet freedom of being less centered on us.
- We announce, sometimes with words, often without. It might be choosing to greet a neighbor whose name we barely know, writing a note to someone who is ill, pausing long enough to listen fully to a child's story or sharing the pain felt by a friend. The Gospel is announced when we live as if love is the most real thing in the world.

Our culture often equates worth with output, visibility, and speed. Brother Charles' Nazareth life challenges that. It says: your value is not in what you produce, but in who you are before God. Silence makes room to remember this truth. It lets us anchor our identity not in applause or efficiency but in being loved into existence.

In practice such silence might look different for each of us. For some, it's rising before dawn for a few minutes of wordless prayer. For others, it's walking without earbuds, letting the sounds of wind or city be enough. It can also be the discipline of pausing before responding, creating a space for grace to enter a conversation.

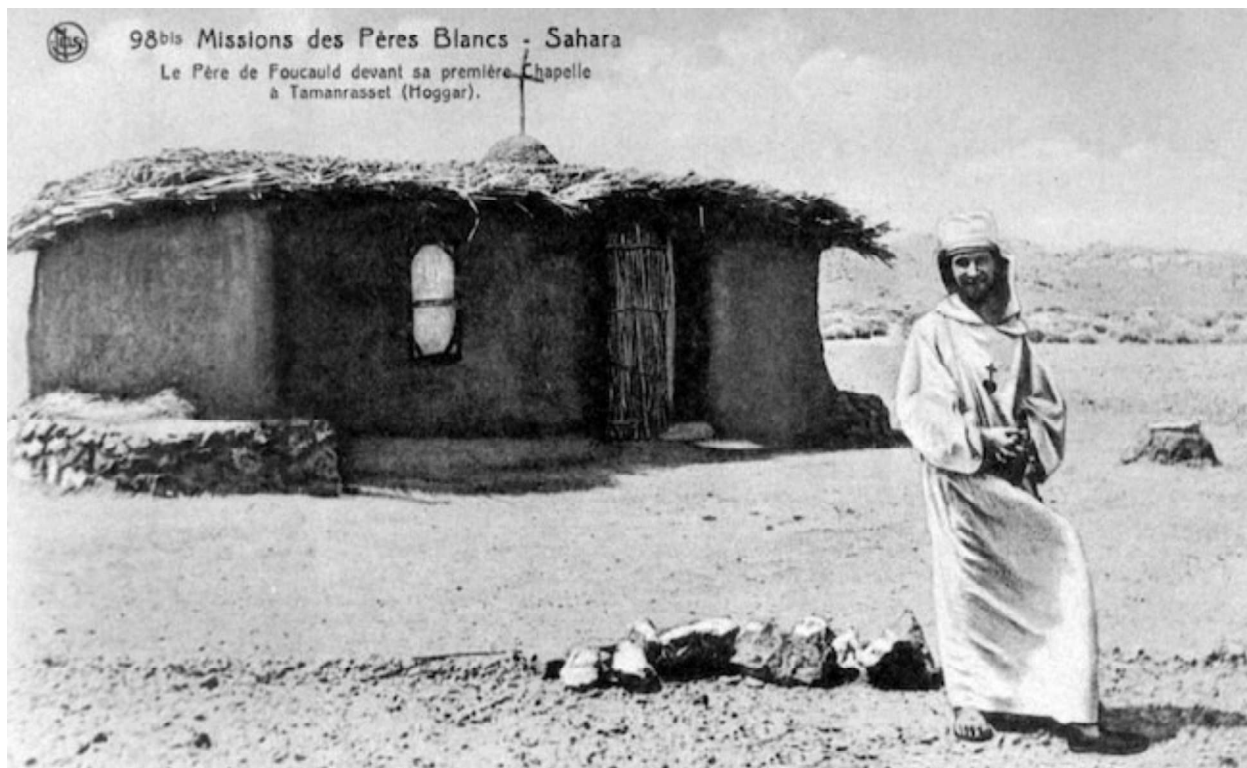
Brother Charles' life in the desert was not an escape from reality. It was an immersion into the most real thing of all: God's steady, quiet presence. In our own noisy age, the spirituality of Nazareth invites us to recover this immersion. Silence, received as a gift, becomes a dwelling place and moment of encounter. There, we find we are not alone, and we learn again how to listen to our loving God.

Your Brother from the North,

Ciro Piccirillo

International Coordinator

Lay Fraternities of Charles de Foucauld

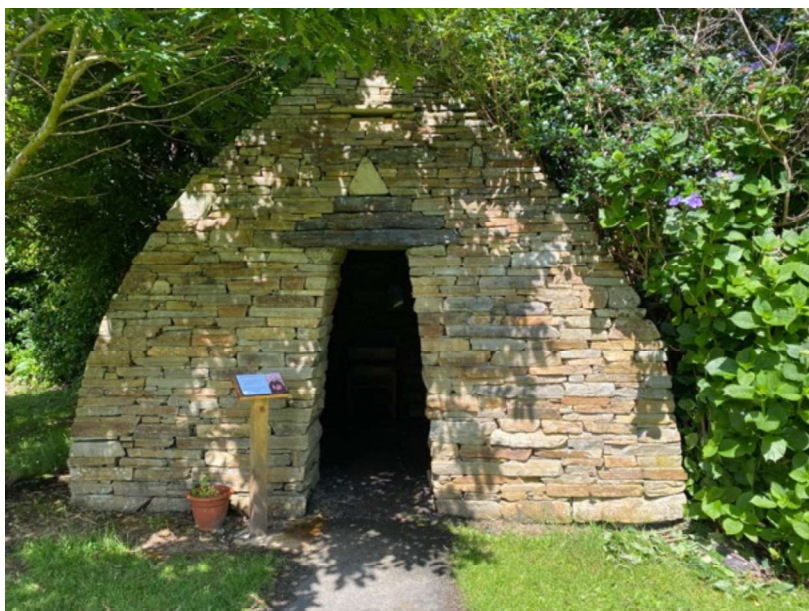


The Sanctuary Café & Celtic Prayer Garden by Arlene Moeller

During my visit to Ireland this past summer, my daughter took me to The Sanctuary Café for lunch, which helps to fund a local drug and alcohol rehabilitation program. Behind the entire project is a lay association, The Columba Community of Prayer and Reconciliation, which was founded in 1981 under the direction of Fr. Neal Carlin, a priest from Derry. The Columba Community ministers to prisoners, both sides of the political divide in North Ireland, and young people. (See iosascentre.com for more information.).



Afterwards we walked around the project's Celtic Prayer garden, which was just down the road. Nestled within the garden were several hermitages available for silent retreats.



Listen to the Sound of a Gentle Blowing

In our highly urbanized societies, silence is not much valued. Our daily environment is polluted with noise: street traffic, industrial complexes, electronic devices, ceaseless chatting and so on. Everywhere! To make sure that we don't have to cope with silence too often, our spontaneous reflex is frequently to look for a way out by overloading our lives with activities.

It happens however that, feeling sometimes the need for a restful stop, we seek refuge in a church. But even there silence is not always prized. Our liturgies and community prayers are often cluttered with words: "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words." (Matthew 6,7)

But why is it so? Does silence frighten us? Is this escape only a reality of our time connected to a hectic way of life or a deeper attitude linked to our nature as fragile and insecure human beings? Perhaps a little of both.

To seek silence is risky and difficult. It means accepting to face and handling the truth about ourselves and the God we truly believe in. Indeed, there is no way to plunge into silence without bringing to light the darkest parts of our soul and meeting an internalized "god" who is not always the God Jesus came to reveal us. But, though challenging, silence is important. The best manner to reach our spiritual maturity is by trying to tame it. Let's now take a moment to explore what the Bible has to say about it.

Going back to the roots of the Revelation in the Old Testament, it appears that the Hebrews were first struck by the glorious majesty of God. Originally, He seems to have been perceived mostly in the noisy power of natural phenomena, for instance, a deafening thunderstorm. The oldest psalms are filled with such clues. The primary attitude of the first Jewish believers, as the one of many other people around them, was then to fall in awe in front of this dreadful and faraway God whose face could not be seen without dying. He was therefore first known as "Yahweh Sabaoth," God of power and might, the God of all gods.

The Hebrews had to go through many painful experiences, slavery and Exodus, occupation and Exile, to reach the point when God could be slowly recognized and worshipped as the only God, a trustworthy Saviour, a God of mercy and faithfulness, a God that doesn't want the death of the sinners but rather that they convert and live (Ezekiel 18,32). In the meantime, their experience of God tended to become more subtle, more interior. For me, the prophet Elijah, in the first book of Kings, is a good witness to this evolution (1 Kings 19, 1-13).

The long journey of the people of God is without any doubt quite similar to the one most of us have to go through in the span of our lifetime. In a sense, their experience is also ours. To understand that only the gentle blowing of a merciful and inner God can cure and heal the most broken parts of our beings takes time, support...and a lot of silence.

Jesus liked silence. He spent long stretches of time in the desert, praying in peaceful and secluded surroundings, after days of exhausting ministry. Sometimes, he took with him some of his disciples so they can discover how important silence was for their spiritual growth.

For instance, it's in the silence of mount Thabor that Jesus felt how deeply He was filled with God's Love and how special was his relationship to the Father: "Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and led them up on a high mountain" (Mt 17, 1). Being with Him, the three apostles were wrapped in the same theophany and transformed.

What Jesus experienced on the holy mountain wasn't meant to be for Him and his closest friends only. Walking in his footsteps, we are called too to climb on the mountain top to share in his Glory and to enter with him in the intimacy of the Trinitarian Life with the Father and the Spirit:

“Through him, with him and in him,
O God, almighty Father,
In the unity of the Holy Spirit,
All glory and honor are yours
For ever and ever. Amen.”

I conclude by reasserting that silence is therefore essential if we truly want to know ourselves and to taste the beauty and the goodness of our God. We can't bypass it. Whether we take a moment to meditate on his Word, or an hour to pray in front of the Eucharist, or simply a few minutes to feel the light breeze on our face while sitting on a park bench, let's dare to take the time to really listen to the sound of God's gentle blowing. Maybe we'll then discover how much our merciful God is closer to ourselves than we ourselves are and be filled with gratitude and a peaceful joy: “God is greater than our heart and knows all things” (1 John 3, 20).

Alain Blanchette

Editor's Note: Alain Blanchette was introduced to Charles de Foucauld by the Little Sisters of Jesus when he was an 18-year-old college student. Since that time St. Charles has been an important part of his life. At age 22 Alain joined The Little Brothers of the Gospel and was a member for 15 years. After returning to secular life, Alain joined the Montreal Lay Fraternity about 20 years ago. Alain is 71 years old and resides in a huge non-profit housing project of 800 apartments in downtown Montreal where he strives to bear witness to the Good News of Jesus.

Tibi Silentium Laus

“We need this silence, this absence of every creature,
so that God can build his hermitage within us.”

Charles de Foucauld

During a retreat at Nazareth in November, 1897, Br. Charles wrote of the hidden life of Jesus: “The invisible part was your life in God...” “First and above all, it was *adoration*...that silent adoration which is the most eloquent of prayers: *Tibi silentium laus* [“Silence is praise to you.”]”¹ Christians seek silence because in it we encounter and adore God. Foucauld noted the prayer of Jesus at home in Nazareth was “first and above all” silent adoration. Living in a noisy village in Roman Palestine, this was probably no easier for our Lord than it is for us today.

We experience two kinds both of noise and silence: external/public and internal/private. Neither silence is easy to achieve. We live amid almost constant noise, continuous racket: traffic, construction, children (bless them), office and home machinery, “music” in shops and offices where we make more noise by talking. To have a measure of external silence, which facilitates the internal kind, we must actively seek it, just as the Lord Jesus did.

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” (Mark 1:35) Jesus proactively sought times and places for silence. But “his companions hunted” [the word in the Greek implies “tracked down” as hunters for prey] Jesus to force him to return to work, teaching and healing (Mark 1:36-39). As if to Jesus Br. Charles wrote, He “lived...with a mother and father who were both poor working people. This was one half of your life, the part turned toward the world.... It was the visible part of your life. The invisible part was your life in God....”² Better than his disciples, Br. Charles understood Jesus: “in the solitude and darkness of the night; your soul was poured out in silence.”³

To experience exterior silence in which to ponder and to pray, we also will have to create time apart from family, friends, and work. It may well be in “inconvenient times” and “very dark” places--- externally or internally. Our silences may not be a sunny afternoon but a very dark night of the soul. When we seek exterior silence our dear family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers may not be happy. It may interfere with their list of “to do’s” for us. Remember, their list may not be *ours* to accomplish.

Finding external places of solitary silence may not quiet the internal noise, the static we constantly create, that voice in our heads which seems to have a continuous feed of “should and ought” or, God forbid, a litany of critiques. Interior silence requires sinking from the yammer in our heads to the silence of our hearts. (Note: This is not to denigrate clear thinking and reason.) If we talk constantly the person to whom we are speaking isn’t allowed a word. (Constant talkers do try our patience, don’t they?) Similarly, if we are constantly “talking” in our heads, how can God speak to us? How will we hear the “still, small voice” (1Kings 19:12) or the voice of the shepherd calling the sheep (John10:27) or receive the comfort of Psalm 46 that “God is our refuge and strength”? We must be still to know that God is God (Psalm 46: 1a, 10a). Foucauld wrote prayer “is that state in which the soul looks wordlessly on God, solely occupied with contemplating him, ... while uttering no words, even in thought.”⁴

Scholarly and popular writing reminds us of the dangers both physical and psychological of constant noise, of the absence of periods of silence. Its absence is especially dangerous for Christians for whom,

¹ Robert Ellsberg (ed.), *Charles de Foucauld* Modern Spiritual Masters Series (Orbis Books, 1999) 50.

² Ellsberg, 49.

³ Ellsberg, 50.

⁴ Ellsberg, 105.

whether external or internal, silence is crucial to the life of prayer and relationship with the Triune God. Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton (who knew of and was influenced by Foucauld) spoke eloquently about silence. “My knowledge of myself in silence,” Merton writes, “opens out into the silence and ‘subjectivity’ of God’s own self.”⁵ “My life is a listening, His [God’s] is a speaking.” “My silence, which takes me away from all other things, is therefore the sacrifice of all things and the offering of my soul to God.”⁶

This reminds us of Br. Charles’ “silent adoration which is the most eloquent of prayers.”⁷ Setting aside the physical and psychological benefits of silence and the myriad techniques both secular and sacred to achieve a measure of it, Foucauld believes the importance of silence is that it is a locus of encounter with God. Our silences are for encounter and adoration. Br. Charles left the noise of Paris for the silence of the Sahara. One reason he fled to the deserts of North Africa was because there he was most likely to encounter and to adore God in silence.

At Nazareth in November 1897, Foucauld prayed, “My God, give me a perpetual sense of your Presence, your Presence in *all* around me...”⁸ (Italics mine.) Those who seek times and places of silence know it is full of presences, and of Divine Presence. Once experienced, silence magnetically draws one back. Silence is not a spiritual technique to be mastered, but a Presence to be encountered and adored.

Foucauld taught that we “preach,” not by words, but by our lives. He wrote in 1897: “It is part of your vocation to proclaim the Gospel from the rooftops, not by what you say, but by how you live.”⁹ 1898: “It is possible to do...great good, infinite good---without using words, without preaching, without fuss but by silence and by giving...a good example.”¹⁰ 1916 (near his martyrdom): “I must be the image of Our Lord in his hidden life: I must proclaim by my life, the Gospel from the rooftops.”¹¹ These silent encounters with God invite us to become *theotokos*, God-bearers in the noisy, roiling, iniquitous (and very beautiful) world in which we live. Seeking silence is not a technique for spiritual self-improvement, but a vocation to live as the Light of Christ in our present darkness.

Bonnie Thurston, July 1, 2025, Wheeling, WV.

For more on Silence see Cyril Antony, SJ, “United with Jesus Christ in Silence: Spirituality of the Little Brothers of Jesus,” in Joseph Victor Edwin, SJ, *Brother to All: The Life and Witness of St. Charles de Foucauld* (Orbis Books, 2022) 91-96.

Editor’s Note: In 2002 Bonnie Thurston resigned a Professorship and Chair in New Testament to live quietly in her home state of West Virginia. She is the author of many books on New Testament and spirituality (including Hidden In God: Discovering the Desert Vision of Charles de Foucauld. Ave Maria Press, 2016).

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956/1977) 70.

⁶ Merton, 74.

⁷ Ellsberg, 50.

⁸ Ellsberg, 109

⁹ Ellsberg, 79.

¹⁰ Ellsberg, 47.

¹¹ Ellsberg, 124.

NEWS FROM LAY FRATERNITIES



Leanne (Anna) Le, a member of our Lay Fraternity in California as well as Jesus Caritas, recently returned from Vietnam where she cared for her ill brother, Fr. Francis Xavier, until his death. Fr. Francis was a diocesan priest as well as a member of Sacerdotale Fraternity, a priests' fraternity of Charles de Foucauld. The nun standing with the walker on the left is Anna's sister, Sr. Francoise Le, who is a member of the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres.

Ma Theresa Dalumpines, a member of a Lay Fraternity in the Philippines, submitted this photo which was taken on 8/17/25 at San Roque Parish, Pasay City, Metro Manila. The Lay Fraternity meets monthly with Fr. Edgardo Coroza, who is a Jesus Caritas Priest as well as their spiritual director. He is also a parish priest at San Roque. Their Lay Fraternity began in January, 2015.



Desert Ramblings by Arlene Moeller

Back in May of this year, my husband and I were seated in a gondola ready to take in the sights and sounds of Venice, Italy. Our gondolier appeared strong, polite, and handsome. What could go wrong? As we floated down the canals, we were able to see how families lived. I sighed. I could just imagine myself dropping the laundry in the canal as I hung it up! I then brought myself back to reality and became mindful again of the quiet lapping of the water as the gondolier pushed his way forward. All of a sudden, my heart leaped! It felt like the gondolier was shouting into my ears. He had pulled out his phone and was talking to someone in Italian. Thankfully after a few minutes he put his phone away and pointed out the home of Marco Polo. Ahh, the quiet lilting sound of the water...So many details to look at...OMG!! He's on the phone again!

It seems that as I become older, the more I relish silence in the parish chapel, which I visit weekly for adoration. When the installation of a large stained-glass window depicting St. Joseph was completed, parishioners were permitted back into the larger chapel (it is a separate building on the church property) in the beginning of March of this year. Now the chapel remains locked during the day, which has caused a lot of confusion. Those people who have been entering into the chapel through a side door via a code under the previous pastor can still manage to get in (like me). If the person really wants in, they can always walk a quarter mile (at least it seems that long!) to the church office for the code. Anyway, it often happens that people are trying to get into the back door, which sounds like a lot of loud banging. If the person takes the time to walk to a side door, then I will definitely get up and let the person in. Well, the other week I walked quickly to the side door to assist a Hispanic man. I opened the door while holding on to the bead of the rosary I was on and called to him since he had already turned away and was at a good distance from me. Suddenly the door slammed shut! I was not able to remember the code, which was tucked inside my rosary pouch inside the chapel along with my purse!

Last week's visit to the chapel was a dream come true! There was banging on the main chapel door. A little later I observed a lady who came to the side door, entered the code, and walked in. She prayed quietly. In the peace-filled chapel I was able to follow my structured routine (to prevent my mind from wandering), which began with prayers of gratitude followed by prayers of petition aka worries on my mind. It was during this part of the hour that out of the blue I recalled the mass shooting that had occurred at the Church of the Annunciation in Minneapolis exactly a week before. Before my lips had time to utter a prayer for the victims, I saw in my mind our Blessed Mother in the distance as I viewed her through the broken stained-glass windows of the school children's church. Mother Mary was hunched over in sorrow, clenching her heart in her hand. Then the stained-glass window of St. Joseph in the chapel caught my eye. I could imagine in my mind St. Joseph gazing at Blessed Mother with utmost compassion. Yes, even in Heaven Joseph looks after Mary!

