For Love's Sake

I recently had the privilege of spending a week on retreat with the Anglican Sisters of the Society of the Love of God at Fairacres, Oxford, whom I have mentioned once or twice before on Monday evenings.

Before I went there this time, I wondered, as I often do before a retreat, how I was going to manage for all those days, with just me, the nuns, their prayers and the silence (it was not a led retreat). But as soon as I arrived and joined in the rhythm of their worship and warm hospitality, I felt taken up once more into the ongoing prayer that is their life.

I am always encouraged when staying with this community of about 15 women. Their very raison d'être is simple but profound: to love God for love of the world – and in my book you can't do much better than that! So I'd like to share some of the insights I've received from them, which I have taken back into the rest of my life as points of wisdom on which to draw.

First, when there seems to be a lot of darkness, distortion and cruelty in the world, their primary emphasis is: 'Focus on the light'. This is not to avoid, dodge or deny the darkness, On the contrary, we still need to hold the agony of the world before God, making the pain of it all into our prayer. But then, equally importantly, we need to focus on the light of God in Christ, and keep coming back to this, because this light is unquenchable and ultimately stronger than all our darkness. This is the meaning of the cross and resurrection, that no matter what evil and sin we throw at Jesus, we cannot quench his love.

I remember talking with one of the sisters not long after the horror of the attack on the Twin Towers in New York on 9/11, and again her emphasis was to keep turning to the light when we pray. And it was around then that I began to see prayer as sometimes 'breathing in the light', for myself and also for the world.

Today this focus on the divine love and light seems more urgent than ever, given the state of things in the world. But no matter how much evil we humans commit, we cannot destroy God's love which is the Source of all our life. And we are called to share in this love. We are never asked to keep loving in our own strength. God's very nature is love (1 John 4) so we are invited to open ourselves to the creative movement of this same divine love in the unfolding moments of our life. So our desire can grow, that God's love may permeate our whole lives, and then become a prayer for the world.

This is no 'easy formula', especially when our own life is tough. But, as Ilia Delio points out in her book '*Making all Things New*', '…absolute love does not save us from suffering, but empowers us to create life, even in the midst of suffering.' (Orbis 2018, p.170)

Finally, while there is so much to worry about, and so much suffering in the world, there is also an infinite amount of goodness, beauty, love, truthfulness, generosity of spirit and creativity in our human community and experience, and in the natural world. In the end we hold the pain and the hope together, and God's love permeates both, which I think is what is meant by that mysterious verse in Psalm 139:12, 'For darkness and light are both alike to you.'

To lead us into silence

> In the *Fairacres Chronicle*, Sister Rose Mary writes: 'These externals [in a convent] arise out of love for the God who made and loves the world, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ, . . . and who , as we become aligned with that love, engages us in his loving transformation of the cosmos.'

And to end the silence, some verses from the First Epistle of John, Chapter 4:

> 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love. … God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.'