Anxious about the global pandemic?
Advice from a Catholic psychologist

By Perry West



While the coronavirus has Americans scrambling for canned goods, respirator masks, and especially toilet paper, one Catholic psychologist has encouraged people to take deep breaths and remain calm.

The World Health Organization labeled the coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, a world-class pandemic this week. Since then, panic and anxiety have become common experiences.

Dr. Christina Lynch, a supervising psychologist for Denver's St. John Vianney Theological Seminary, told CNA that fear of the pandemic is normal. But even in the global health crisis, she said, peace is not beyond our reach.

"Being frightened about something that we don't understand is normal. I think the first thing we have to do is normalize our emotions and realize it's okay. We all are uncertain. We don't know what the future holds," she said. "We fear the unknown. We want to be in control."

As of March 13, the virus has infected over 140,000 people and claimed nearly 5,400 lives, the NY Times reported. U.S. President Donald Trump declared the crisis a national emergency Friday afternoon.

Coronavirus expert Dr. Anthony Fauci said the situation will worsen, noting that the pandemic will last for several months. The option of a complete social shutdown is not off the table for Americans, he said.

Amid the anxiety, people have rushed to local supermarkets to stock up on medicine, hand sanitizer, and, curiously, toilet paper.

Videos have appeared online under the hashtags #toiletpaperpanic or #toiletpaperapocalypse, which show stores with empty shelves, and even fights breaking out over rolls of two-ply.

Lynch said that the hoarding of toilet paper conveys a panicked mob mentality taking root. But there are means to remain calm in the face of the upcoming storm.

She offered a few techniques to help quell rising anxiety levels.

Lynch encouraged people prone to anxiety to pay close attention to expert advice on avoiding

the virus, like washing hands, wiping down surfaces, and limiting interactions with large crowds. She said that for most people, following substantiated advice will help diminish any sense of panic and worry.

She also suggested Catholics can make the practice of handwashing an opportunity for prayer. For example, she said washing hands while saying a Hail Mary takes about 20 seconds, the expert-recommended amount of time at the sink.

Lynch also said anyone can benefit from reflecting on how they've already conquered anxiety, and then practicing calming routines that have worked in the past.

"It's a very normal reaction to be fearful or concerned…[but] you don't want to fan the flame of that fear. So what are the steps that you can take, knowing yourself?" she asked.

In general, Lynch said, people can benefit from breathing techniques, which help equalize the body and reduce anxiety.

"Breathing is one of the best self-calming tools we can have. You know, just relaxing and creating a habit twice a day to just take some deep breaths, close our eyes, hold our breath and exhale... You [may] pray a Hail Mary while you're holding your breath and then you calmly exhale."

Lynch said there are also plenty of spiritual practices to help Catholics handle anxiety.

Lynch suggested Catholics look up the devotional practices recommended by their local diocese. Even if churches have canceled their Masses, she said, Catholics can also watch the Mass on channels like EWTN, or online, she said.

"We're so blessed to have our faith, the Catholic faith because we have so many tools from a spiritual perspective. I think this is a great opportunity because we're so busy in our daily life

that we can use this to actually develop some spiritual habits, and incorporate them in this attempt to reduce her anxiety."

"Maybe develop a habit of just spending five to 15 minutes every morning when you first get up. Maybe get up a little bit earlier and just pray, whether it's silent … read[ing]scripture ... or pray[ing] a decade of the rosary," she said.

Lynch urged people monitor their intake of media, especially news sources that have politicized the virus or promoted fear.

"Some of the things that we know we can do to counteract fear is limit your media coverage from sources that want to instill fear. Like, those that politicized the virus or those that only focus on the bad stuff that's happening with the virus or what could happen rather than the facts," Lynch advised.

She acknowledged that the virus is likely to spread and there is a chance that many people will be impacted. She emphasized the value of taking practical steps in being prepared for self-quarantine.

And Lynch encouraged Catholics to see the spiritual opportunity in the weeks ahead.

"We're so used to being in control. This is a great opportunity to know that God's in control and to just give him more control and pray a prayer of trust to God every day." (CNA)