Ten Tips for Coping with Coronavirus: A spirituality for strange times

Brendan McManus SJ draws on the wisdom of St Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, to formulate his ten tips for dealing with the Covid-19 crisis. Brendan is the author of a number of books including *Finding God in the Mess*, and *Deeper in the Mess,* both co-authored with Jim Deeds. They share a down-to-earth approach to spirituality that follows the example of Ignatius who urged his fellow companions and the people of his time to ‘find God in all things’.

In his introduction to the ten tips Brendan writes:

*This is a particularly tough time in human history where the new coronavirus has many people worried, unsure as to how to act and often undermined by fear.*

*There can be for some a tendency to behave in a selfish or irrational way, where emotions can often override good decision making.*

*Already we have seen examples of people behaving irresponsibly in panic buying or hoarding, ignoring social distancing or hand sanitizing guidelines. Others dream up conspiracy theories and some even spiritualize the problem as a divinely sent plague, naively believing that religious faith alone will protect them from contracting the virus.*

*However, we have also seen examples of great heroism (especially in front line staff), good will, human solidarity and courage. There is always a way through, people in darkness always find their way to the light.*

*St. Ignatius Loyola was a survivor, he survived a major life-threatening injury, convalescence, life begging on the road and times of great uncertainty. He developed an approach to ‘living through difficulty’ based on his experience and using certain rules of thumb. Based on these insights, I humbly offer some reflections and practical advice which may be of help.*

**Ten Ignatian Tips for Coping with Coronavirus:**

**A spirituality for strange times**

**1. Living in the real**
The first thing is to accept this new reality which has overtaken us. This is a painful transition as we try to hang on to the past, finding such radical change hard to accept. Things that we took for granted such as shaking hands, socializing and even going to school or work have radically altered. The Ignatian catchphrase ‘Finding God in all things’, challenges us to find peace in inhabiting this new, unasked for reality. The primary thing therefore is to accept the new reality or ‘new normal’. Different rules apply and all of us are asked to change our behavior to protect ourselves and crucially to protect others, especially those classed as vulnerable or with an underlying health condition. It’s a no brainer that medical science has to dictate our approach, even given that the medical institutions are also scrambling to get a handle on this too. Now is not the time for private theories, alternative approaches or untested methods. See the [Center for Disease Control (CDC) website](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus.) for up to date health and protection advice.

**2. Face your fears**
Though fear, anxiety, and worry are normal responses to the current situation, it’s important to not let them take over. Fear is not a good counsellor or guide, taken to its extreme it is crippling and immobilizing. Ignatius recommends acting directly against unhelpful forces such as fear that can motivate us to make poor decisions. His term for this is ‘agere contra’, which means ‘to act against’. The key thing to get here is that Ignatius is urging us to push back, to be proactive and not to give up. This could be summed up as: ‘feel the fear and do the best thing anyway’. Contemplate your mortality and the fragility of life that this crisis points to. The paradox is that accepting this fact allows us to really live and to act appropriately. Every day is a gift, a loan from the future. It’s a miracle that we exist at all. Normally we are so busy ‘living’ that we take the gift of life for granted. We are held and loved by the divine. Take a moment to let this life-giving realization sink in. There is nothing to be afraid of. In fact, we have a chance to put our affairs in order here, to take stock, to acknowledge failures and triumphs, and to see the hand of the Spirit here. Reflect on the question posed by poet Mary Oliver, “What will you do with your one wild and precious life?”

**3. Avoiding extremes**
Extreme situations tend to bring out extreme reactions. One extreme is to be so overwhelmed that you are almost paralyzed with fear and incapable of practicing sensibly the recommended guidelines for dealing with this virus.  The other extreme is the temptation to deny or to underestimate the risk involved. You can maybe feel ‘bulletproof’ as a young person or apathetic and demotivated as an older person. In both cases the unhelpful question, ‘what do I care?’ may be driving your actions. In between the two extremes is the space that most of us are called to inhabit. There we can take all the precautions necessary and find a way of ‘living within the limits’ that has self-care balanced with concern for others. The goal is acceptance of the situation and taking reasonable responsive measures, hopefully being able to find meaning and purpose in this new reality. Ignatius uses the word ‘discernment’ to underline how to make good decisions. This involves taking time, being aware of the pull of the extremes and trying to find more reasonable options. It also includes carefully weighing choices, getting advice and evaluating outcomes.

**4. Focus on the light**
One of the central Christian insights is that when darkness is all around, we are called to keep faithful and focused on the light, no matter how dim it seems. Remember the dynamic of the Cross. In moments of darkness and apparent abandonment, God works most powerfully. God is with us in the mess of things. The joy of the Resurrection always follows the anguish of the Cross. It’s important to recognize we still have choices here and how we act is important. We need to take responsibility and act wisely, without being paralyzed by fear or alternatively, driven by a rash impulsivity (panic buying for example). There are now new opportunities for solidarity, supporting others and building community. Ironically, smartphones and social networking present perfect solutions to ‘distancing’ while being able to communicate in a way that people feel your presence.

**5. Keep yourself in balance**
In times of crisis or storm, it is really important to anchor yourself so that you don’t get blown about by the winds. Ignatius recommends keeping your eyes on the path, one step at a time, moving steadily on. It’s the image of a journey or pilgrimage where you attend to your feet and trust in the trail. This means getting all the basics right – rest, structure, diet, exercise, appropriate socializing and keeping oneself busy. The problem with this time of great social upheaval is that people can become scared, upset and irrational. We can get distracted from getting the basics right, taking our eyes off the road to look at the storm. It is understandable that this would happen, but we also have the power to take control of our own behavior, and our physical and mental well-being. This means paying attention to our basic human needs and responding in a healthy way to them.
• Eat well, avoid snacks and junk food.
• Get some exercise, avoid long periods of sitting around.
• Stay connected with people, don’t get too isolated.
• Try to make good use of your time by putting new structures and habits in place.
This is challenging but not impossible, normally it takes 6-7 weeks to set up a new routine. Setting up good habits will see us through. Take it gradually, walk one step at a time, but keep moving.

**6. Assess your weak points**
Ignatius advises us to shore up our defenses when under attack, remembering that it is our weaknesses or vulnerabilities that are often exploited. He uses the image of a castle under siege. The invaders don’t storm the main gate but look for an unguarded back door or a crack in the wall. This sort of health crisis stirs up deep fears in us about lack of control, breakdown of structures, etc. It can easily fuel our existing weaknesses of worry, obsession and extreme behaviors (think of how someone with OCD could be overwhelmed with contamination fears). A useful Ignatian rule of thumb is to work out what your weak points are and to address those first. For example, acknowledging that I am fearful or anxious by nature allows me to address these concerns first. This is empowering. I now have a strategy. I don’t have to fix everything, just enough to block the ‘holes’. Perhaps you may need to use psychological techniques like Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) that asks whether certain thoughts are reasonable. Or you might use concentrated prayer to bring God’s grace to bear on an old wound.

**7. Real prayer**
This is a time for prayer. Prayer is a natural response to uncertainty and loss of control. It allows us to be in communication with the divine. It empowers us to act and live without fear. Prayer can be as simple as a conversation or dialogue with the creator, the source of our being. The key is to bring the whole of our selves to God, including all our fears and worries, and ask for help and guidance. Give it all to God, all the fear, worry, and concern. This can be difficult as we want to be in control. It is hard to ask for help when modern culture rubbishes the idea of divinity and anything other than the solitary individual existing in a material world. However, there is something else going on here in these extraordinary times. The precariousness of life is being revealed to us. Our inter-connectedness and need for community is becoming clear. There is a call for us to embrace our limited humanity and our need for a higher love. This is not a theory or a concept, this is an experience. Try it and see what happens.

**8. Focus on what you can do**

While there are many things you clearly cannot do without contravening official guidelines, there are many other things that you can do safely. See this crisis as an opportunity to improve yourself, be a better person and help others. Don’t dwell on negativity and fears. Try to move into gratitude, being thankful for small things. Take a moment at the end of each day to look back and see the moments of light that can only be seen with hindsight and reflection. Developing gratitude is a powerful antidote to negativity and apathy.
There are a number of examples of positive actions that people are already doing. So you can:
• Check in on neighbors especially the old and vulnerable
• Keep yourself fit and well, watch your diet and keep a healthy balance, get out in the fresh air
• Make good use of your time, take up new hobbies.
• Use this as an opportunity to build or strengthen relationships with family and friends.
• Figure out what you can offer to this situation
• Everyone has a gift or talent, something to offer to others.

Pray with the problem, focus on the solution.

**9. The greatest good**
There is a dilemma in game theory whereby a game is set up such that a lone player gets a small reward for acting selfishly, whereas if all the players cooperate, they get a much greater joint reward. This is exactly the situation that we face now. Acting selfishly by stockpiling and protecting only oneself is a limited strategy. Everyone knows that the only way this will work in the long term is if people cooperate. ‘There is enough food for everyone’ is the mantra from the stores, but only if people act in a restrained and responsible way. This is sobering but true. We all need to hold our nerves and cooperate in order to make good use of food and medical facilities. We need to cooperate and support each other for what will probably be a long haul over some months. Reaching out and doing something for others takes the focus off ourselves and benefits both the giver and the receiver. Ignatius says “love shows itself in deeds more than words”.  The impact of a word, text or prayer for another in these exceptional times cannot be underestimated.

**10. Making good decisions**
Now more than ever we need to be sure we make good decisions. Some of the key aspects of the health advice we are given require good decision making. We note if we are showing certain symptoms for example and decide about getting appropriate medical help or testing. Also, crucially, we have to protect others by our responsible behavior and even through our absence in some cases. Some of the Ignatian rules for discernment are helpful here: gather as much information as you can, make good, unbiased judgments about situations and people, and act in responsible and socially ethical ways. Inevitably, there will be people who we will be faced with complex and challenging decisions that involve other people, including some who may be medically vulnerable. They will need to be able to take advice, consult wisely and decide with clear heads. For all of us, it’s especially important not to panic or be ruled by emotions. Though understandable in this unprecedented situation, strong emotions can be unhelpful in good decision making. What can be helpful is to imagine a set of pros and cons, to act as your own devil’s advocate, and to try to find imaginative solutions to problems. St Ignatius cautions in times of stress that we shouldn’t reverse any previous solid decisions, and to be careful about being panicked into making rash ones.

<http://www.jesuit.ie/news/a-spirituality-for-strange-times/?fbclid=IwAR0BgKkK3vsTaCvIvYQTek9QGQnU1_dsJoq3LZ4gk9H0EmdEWQdPbP1Kh-s>