

## Research Article

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# Navigating the Stay-at-Home Order with Benedictine Stability

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**Abstract:** In this article, I argue that Benedictine stability might provide a rational modulation for some people to not only cope with but also flourish during the pandemic *vis-à-vis* the stay-at-home (SHO) order. I will not argue that those who obey the SHO are more rational than those who don't or *vice versa*. Instead, I will argue that those who end up following the SHO, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, can rationalize following the SHO by learning from the Benedictine vow of stability. First, stability in a physical space reimagined as a kind of retreat from society might be beneficial for rejuvenating oneself and pursuing what one values. Second, stability negatively discourages people from escaping a difficult reality and positively encourages them to overcome challenges in the institutions in which they belong. Third, stability can be seen as a necessary context for the betterment of character.

**Keywords:** spirituality, monasticism, rationality, The Rule of St. Benedict, coronavirus pandemic, *civitas*, cloister, community, character development

## 1 The stay-at-home order

Early 2020 saw unprecedented measures being taken by governments to enforce the stay-at-home order (SHO) as a strategy to curb the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>1</sup> By March 2021, when this article was written, many principalities had relaxed their rules regarding the SHO, as the vaccine rollouts had begun. In some countries, however, experts were still considering lockdowns. On February 22, 2021, for example, the United Kingdom government launched a campaign to encourage people to stay at home due to the dangerous virus “variants of concern.”<sup>2</sup> Brazil's daily death toll as of March 23, 2021 was more than 3,000 people, which was the highest since the pandemic began. Economists were urging the president of Brazil (Jair Messias Bolsonaro) to consider imposing lockdowns.<sup>3</sup> Even in countries like the United States, where experts were cautiously optimistic that the pandemic may be ending, there were warnings for people not to let down their guard too quickly. Tens of thousands of people were still getting infected daily, with hundreds dying every day, and the virus variants were spreading quickly.<sup>4</sup> The discourse of the SHO has indeed been changing, but the end of such orders does not seem to lie in the near future.

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1 Castillo et al., “The Effect of State-Level Stay-at-Home Orders on COVID-19 Infection Rates.”

2 Cabinet Office, *Guidance: COVID-19 Response – Spring 2021*.

3 Sousa, “Brazil Posts Record Single-Day Toll of 3,251 Virus Deaths.”

4 Stein, “The Future Of The Pandemic In The U.S.”

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There have been variations of the SHO in different places with respect to what people can or cannot do, but the basic idea is that people should stay in their domiciles except when they have to make trips for essential goods, such as food and medicine, or to work in businesses deemed essential, such as grocery stores, hospitals, and public transportation.<sup>5</sup> Surely when emergency situations occur, such as wildfires or hurricanes, evacuations are permissible and might even be mandatory.<sup>6</sup>

The SHO has been met with various reactions by people around the world, from commitment to resistance and from trust to disbelief.<sup>7</sup> Many people have complied with the order, thinking that the SHO would help slow down the escalation of the pandemic. Others were skeptical. One study found that those who believe to some degree that the “Coronavirus is a bioweapon developed by China to destroy the West” or that “Jews have created the virus to collapse the economy for financial gain” would be less likely to follow the SHO.<sup>8</sup>

The resistance to the SHO is fueled by the multidimensional challenges it presents to lives at different levels. Individuals, businesses, and countries have suffered the economic impacts from the SHO, with the loss of income and the unemployment rate sky-rocketing.<sup>9</sup> The psychological costs of the SHO have also been acknowledged by various studies. One study in the United States examining the period between March 27, 2020 and April 5, 2020 has shown that perceived financial worry, depression, anxiety, and loneliness have increased due to the SHO.<sup>10</sup> Relationships are struggling as well, as indicated by the reported increase of intimate partner violence, domestic abuse, stress, and divorce rate.<sup>11</sup> In January 2021, the World Health Organization warned of short- and long-term mental health problems for many people, including depression and substance abuse disorders.<sup>12</sup>

Depending on one’s views about the trustworthiness of the media, the reliability of the governments, etc., if rationality is understood as means-end rationality (*Zweckrationalität*),<sup>13</sup> both resisting and complying with the SHO can be rational in different respects. Those who think that the SHO is based on flawed data or on a hidden political agenda would reject it because it is deemed unnecessary and even harmful. Those who think that the SHO is completely justified would obey it because it is deemed expedient for the well-being of individuals and society.

My aim in this article is not to argue that those who comply with the SHO are more rational than those who don’t or *vice versa*. Rather, I suggest that there is a more rational way to execute the SHO for people who do end up staying at home, either voluntarily or involuntarily. My proposal is that one can rationalize following the SHO by learning from the Benedictine vow of stability. This strategy is an example of how religion might provide a rational way in coping with and even flourishing during the coronavirus pandemic.

More precisely, I argue for three things. First, stability in a physical space reimagined as a kind of retreat from society might be beneficial for rejuvenation and the pursuit of what one values. Second, stability might negatively discourage people from escaping a difficult reality during the pandemic and might positively encourage them to overcome challenges in the social institutions where they belong, such as the institutions of work, family, and religion. Third, stability can be seen as a necessary context for character development.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Pritzker, “COVID-19 Executive Order No. 30.”

<sup>6</sup> McGrath, “Oregon Wildfires;” “Thousands Told to Evacuate Gulf Coast as Hurricane Laura Nears.”

<sup>7</sup> Czeisler et al., “Public Attitudes, Behaviors, and Beliefs Related to COVID-19, Stay-at-Home Orders, Nonessential Business Closures, and Public Health Guidance – United States, New York City, and Los Angeles, May 5–12, 2020.”

<sup>8</sup> Freeman et al., “Coronavirus Conspiracy Beliefs, Mistrust, and Compliance with Government Guidelines in England,” 12.

<sup>9</sup> Klebnikov, “Stocks Fall, Dow Loses 300 Points After Coronavirus Job Losses Surpass 30 Million.”

<sup>10</sup> Tull et al., “Psychological Outcomes Associated with Stay-at-Home Orders and the Perceived Impact of COVID-19 on Daily Life.”

<sup>11</sup> Kaukinen, “When Stay-at-Home Orders Leave Victims Unsafe at Home;” Liu, “Is Covid-19 Changing Our Relationships?”

<sup>12</sup> Adhanom, *Mental Health Preparedness and Response for the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

<sup>13</sup> Means-end rationality or instrumental rationality may be expressed in the following form: “If I desire X, I should do Y (because Y would be the rational thing to do if I want to get X).”

<sup>14</sup> I should clarify at the outset that this rationalization strategy does not readily presuppose any particular normative theory, such as utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, or virtue ethics. One might be able to use the utilitarian or deontological

## 2 Benedictine stability

In the *Regula Benedicti* (RB), St. Benedict (480–543 AD) provides a manual for monks who, for most of their lives, “stay at home” in their monastery.<sup>15</sup> There is an understanding that every Benedictine monastery “is, and ought to be, a home.”<sup>16</sup> The monks can sometimes make trips that are deemed necessary for their spiritual advancement, such as to visit holy shrines and holy people.<sup>17</sup> In general, however, “staying put” in a monastic enclosure is the rule for monks, where they engage in worship, study, discipline, and work.

What may be counterintuitive for many people today is that monks voluntarily choose not only to be a part of a community but also to stay at home in the spatial sense for their entire lives. They believe that staying in a monastery can be an occasion for spiritual growth. Viewed from this angle, it isn’t surprising that St. Benedict lists the following three vows that a novice should take when entering a Benedictine monastery: the vows of stability, conversion of life, and obedience:

Suscipiendus autem in oratorio coram omnibus promittat de stabilitate sua et conversatione morum suorum et oboedientia. [The one to be received, however, must first promise his stability, fidelity to the monastic lifestyle and obedience before all in the oratory.] (58.17)<sup>18</sup>

The concept of Benedictine stability implies constancy and perseverance in physically staying put in a certain monastery.<sup>19</sup> Let us take a look at this idea.

### 2.1 From the *civitas* to the cloister

A Benedictine monk is called to leave society and embrace a life in the physical monastic cloister.<sup>20</sup> Although there is a sense in which the cloister is a part of the *civitas*, I am using the term *civitas* to refer to the active life (*vita activa*) in society as opposed to the contemplative monastic life (*vita contemplativa*). Please note, however, that this distinction between the active and contemplative life, although useful to highlight certain practices or emphases, is ultimately superficial because contemplation is a kind of action, and action can be a form of contemplation.

A person who has decided to become a Benedictine monk would face challenges in living in a confined physical space possibly for the rest of his life. A monastic life is not luxurious and there are tedious rules to follow that demand discipline and sacrifice. St. Benedict thus warns people considering the monastery that there are hardships in store. After a period of two months, if an inquirer still perseveres in stability (*de stabilitate*) (RB 58.7–9), he can continue to the next step of discernment. The aspiring monks see the value and the rationality of voluntarily moving into such enclosed space because they usually think such space allows them to seek God and obey God’s commands (RB 58.7–9).

The SHO differs from the vow of stability in that people do not always comply with the SHO voluntarily. Instead, those who comply with the SHO might do so out of necessity for health reasons. But we can see that

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perspectives in discussing Benedictine stability and the SHO. Nevertheless, given the emphasis on virtues in Benedictine spirituality (e.g., patience, obedience, and discretion), there is a *prima facie* reason to think that virtue ethics would be a natural ethical framework to utilize.

<sup>15</sup> Many Benedictine monks died in their monasteries during the Black Death pandemic in the fourteenth century. See Clark, *The Benedictines in the Middle Ages*, 268–9.

<sup>16</sup> Butler, *Benedictine Monachism*, 112–3.

<sup>17</sup> Benedict, *Benedict’s Rule*, 499.

<sup>18</sup> The Latin texts and the English translation are taken from Terrence Kardong’s *Benedict’s Rule*.

<sup>19</sup> The architecture of the monastery itself reflects an aspiration to stability with the interconnectedness of all the building functions. See Irvine, “The Architecture of Stability.”

<sup>20</sup> To see the debate between two interpretations of stability, either it should be understood as stability of place (*stabilitas loci*) or stability of the monastic vocation (*stabilitas status*), see Monson, “*Status or Loci?*” My own understanding is that stability in RB should be understood as pertaining to both place and status.

the movement of a monastic candidate from the *civitas* to the cloister is similar to the move many people make during the pandemic from the active life in society to their secluded homes for months with no end in sight yet. Again, this is not to discount the fact that even during the lockdown, people are often busier working from home.

As I mentioned before, there is a means-end rationality that one can provide to ground this move during the pandemic, which is somewhat similar to the Kantian hypothetical imperative: “If I want to minimize the risk of contracting the coronavirus, then I will comply with the SHO as best as I can.” This kind of rationality might get people to comply with the SHO, but the reason to do so can still be fortified to help them stay at home for a prolonged period of time.

For those following the SHO, the Benedictine vow of stability might provide a way for them to find more substantive reasons why the SHO can be valuable. This strategy is a shameless call to rationalize the SHO. For instance, the SHO might be seen as a chance to reevaluate one’s life, take stock of one’s resources, and plan for what may be coming next. And although some have become busier at home due to added responsibilities of taking care of family members and working at the same time, the SHO may have made available times that were previously used for commuting or unnecessary travel. Like the Benedictine monks in their enclosure, people who follow the SHO may engage more in prayer, work that is more accountable and productive, the cultivation of discipline and virtues, and the building and rebuilding of relationships. In short, one may find rationality in the SHO because it may help the person pursue what is deemed valuable, similar to how monks are able to find withdrawing from society to be beneficial.

## 2.2 From the cloister to the community

The vow of stability or the promise to stay in a certain monastery, nevertheless, should be understood not only as a promise to remain in a particular physical monastic enclosure, but also as a vow to stay in a congregation or community, which should be distinguished from the physical monastery building.<sup>21</sup> When a monastic candidate enters a monastery, he becomes a brother to the other monks and the abbot becomes his father. A monastery is an idealized family where discipline is upheld and love is practiced.

The community or the congregation of monks must be a functioning institution for the monastery to flourish. Disillusionment is not an excuse for escapism, but an invitation to finding resolutions for the whole community. As Michael Casey writes, “Stability prevents us from running away from necessary development.”<sup>22</sup> Whatever challenges and conflicts are happening in the monastery, monks have to communicate, negotiate, and resolve those conflicts in order to live together. Of course, quitting from the monastery is a possibility, but doing so will not cease all problems. There are challenges in every institution. The grass is not always greener on the other side, as it were. By contrast, the vow of stability invites monks to be faithful to the community for the rest of their lives.

This is the second rationale that one can learn from the Benedictine way of life. Whether a marital condition is exacerbated due to the SHO during the pandemic or whether family members have come to feel more suffocating during the lockdown, Benedictine stability invites people to stay faithful to their community and work things out. In this way, the vow of stability is not only a move from the *civitas* to the cloister, but also from simply living in the cloister to doing so in a way that manifests fidelity to the community. Whether it is for the institution of marriage, family, work, or religion, people need to “make it work” through communication, therapy, and conflict resolutions. In normal circumstances (e.g., where there is no extreme domestic abuse), such a vow of stability might help people keep their communities intact during the pandemic.

<sup>21</sup> Polan, “Spiritual Value of the Benedictine Vow of Stability,” 231.

<sup>22</sup> Casey, “The Value of Stability,” 293.

## 2.3 From the community to character

We've seen that the Benedictines first move from society to the cloister, and then from the cloister to the community. However, they need to progress further to attaining *stabilitas* (which is a character trait) in the community. One can become a monk, vowing to be faithful to stay in a physical enclosure and to be a part of a community, but if there is no stability in his mind and character, the vow can't be kept to the fullest. A monk can't be a good monk if he is constantly anxious and if his thoughts and emotions are occupied by the pleasures and fantasies of the world beyond the monastery walls. I should like to make it very clear now that the movements from the *civitas* to the community and to character are not always temporally or logically prior to one another, but are instead intertwined with and reinforced by each other.

What would instead be the desired characteristics of the monks in the monastery? In RB 4, St. Benedict provides a list of the tools of the good works, which consists of exhortations and commandments for the monastic community. The list includes more serious prescriptions, such as the Decalogue, ethical commands, and a call to character reform. It also addresses practical issues, such as wine-drinking and making jokes. The Benedictine monks are then characterized as virtuous people who utilize these tools of good works in a community and for the community.

What interests us in this article is the context in which these instruments of good works are utilized:

Officina vero ubi haec omnia diligenter operemur claustra sunt monasterii et stabilitas in congregatione. [The workshop where we should work hard at all these things is the monastic enclosure and stability in community.] (RB 4.78)

More than simply being an attitude or a trait, stability in a community is also understood by St. Benedict as a “workshop” where the instruments of good works can be honed. Without stability as the backdrop for this to happen, the monks would not be able to grow in grace and virtue.

Accordingly, the life of the Benedictines can't simply be a life confined to a physical space or to a community; rather, it should also be a *sui generis* monastic community life that is committed to the practice of stability itself. Living in a monastic space without embracing the monastic life would be inauthentic. Embracing a monastic life without living in a monastery is tempting oneself to one's downfall. It is this pairing of monastic physical space and monastic lifestyle that makes things work in a Benedictine monastery.<sup>23</sup>

In turn, the commitment and the practice of stability would enable the monks to fulfill the other Benedictine vows, especially the vow of *conversatio morum* (fidelity to monastic life). This vow requires that monks constantly make daily progress both in their inner character and in their outer lifestyle as monastics. St. Benedict says in Prologue 49, “As we progress in the monastic life and in faith, our hearts will swell with the unspeakable sweetness of love, enabling us to race along the way of God's commandments.” Stability serves as the necessary context for such change of character to happen. Notice that stability is not identical to stagnation. On the contrary, stability encourages moral and spiritual betterment while recognizing the great benefits of staying faithfully in one community. For example, the monks would be able to learn and exercise the virtues of perseverance, love, and gratitude.<sup>24</sup>

In following the SHO, people have struggled with loneliness, anxiety, anger, and boredom. These are the things that Benedictine monks also struggle with. The monks have to fight against *acedia* (the noonday demon), feelings of isolation, and a lost sense of self. The monks must address these issues at home and in their community with *stabilitas* as the necessary context for spiritual development and self-discovery by finding their calling and true selves.<sup>25</sup> People who follow the SHO can do the same. When people must stay at home during the pandemic, they can use their fidelity to staying in their physical homes and communities (e.g., family, work, religious institution) as a workshop to become more virtuous. This might require a

<sup>23</sup> Vogüé, “How Ought Novices To Be Formed in Stability Today?,” 315.

<sup>24</sup> Polan, “Spiritual Value of the Benedictine Vow of Stability,” 232.

<sup>25</sup> McMurtry, “On Being ‘At Home’,” 84–5.

closer look at one's own thoughts and emotions to arrive at an honest self-awareness. People can ask what they should do to improve their own character as well as what they could do for other people.

With respect to care for others, the phenomenon of “caremongering” in which quarantined people during the coronavirus pandemic start caring for each other is an example of how people can display social solidarity even during statewide isolation.<sup>26</sup> In other words, self-cultivation does not exclude other-regarding concerns. Not only the SHO might help to curb the spread of the infection, hence respecting the well-being of others, but it might also become an opportunity to develop character that could be valuable for the sake of others. This is not unlike the cloistered monks who do good things for the world by praying, brewing beer and making wines, running farms, and employing people from the surrounding community.

St. Benedict contrasts the cenobitic monks such as the Benedictines with a type of monks called the gyrovagues (RB 1.10–12), who move around from one monastery to another, hence lacking an opportunity to live in the same community for a prolonged period. The constant motion of the gyrovagues makes it impossible for them to form meaningful friendships, to contribute to the community in a significant way, and to work through conflicts and personal struggles. The Benedictines, by contrast, take the vow of stability, which gives them the opportunity to strengthen their communities and personal lives. Esther de Waal nicely sums up this idea of the importance of embracing stability in one's cell and community for the cultivation of character: “The stability of place and of relationships are all the means towards the establishment of stability of the heart.”<sup>27</sup>

At this point, one can say that navigating the SHO with Benedictine stability has a long-term benefit, as it is a way to attain stability of character, which is a long-lasting state in a person's life. First, given what we know about the recurrence of pandemics in the history of the world, we can reasonably say that the coronavirus pandemic might not be the last pandemic that will ever happen.<sup>28</sup> Other than new pandemics, there might be other occasions in which a person might have to follow a form of the SHO again, such as wars and natural disasters. A person with stability will be more prepared to face these unpredictable challenges. Second, there are people who are or might become home-bound regardless of the pandemic, due to work conditions, health issues, and family situations. The practice of stability and stable character will help these people flourish during their continued stay at home. Third, the practice of stability in following the SHO would invite people to think about the centrality of home once again. During the coronavirus pandemic, home has become a significant human institution that allows other social institutions such as work, education, and religion to keep functioning. The practice of staying in might help people once again to see home as a place where one can find an opportunity to grow through crucial conversations, individual and family devotions, daily meals, work, and rest.

### 3 Challenges

It goes without saying that the challenges to adopting Benedictine stability for people who follow the SHO are colossal. There is already a group of people who are called the Benedictine oblates who promise to follow the Rule of St. Benedict as much as possible in their daily lives in the secular world.<sup>29</sup> These people are not Benedictine monks but rather people from all walks of life (both lay people and clergy) who are affiliated with a Benedictine monastery. Even during non-pandemic times, Benedictine oblates face difficulties in transferring ritual practices from the monastery into their own contexts.<sup>30</sup> Oblates in the world

<sup>26</sup> Pylypa, “A Week in the Life of COVID-19 in Ottawa, Canada,” 37.

<sup>27</sup> Waal, *Seeking God*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Brunnersum, “COVID-19 Will not Be Last Pandemic: WHO.”

<sup>29</sup> Holdaway, *The Oblate Life*.

<sup>30</sup> Quartier, “Monastic Form-of-Life Out of Place,” 15.

understandably have more difficulties setting aside regular times to pray and work. The following challenges, then, need to be acknowledged in this discourse on Benedictine stability during the coronavirus pandemic.

First, in contrast to a monastery where there is a controlled schedule, homes during the pandemic can be a chaotic and an overwhelming environment. For those who are still single and living alone, their homes can become a makeshift hermitage during the lockdown. People may still question whether Benedictine stability is merely an out-of-reach luxury for some people who sometimes have to juggle between childcare, housekeeping, and two part-time jobs.<sup>31</sup> This is surely a genuine concern, but the original idea of Benedictine stability comes from the Greek ὑπομονή (*hupomonē*), which means patient endurance. This virtue, which is displayed in martyrdom, anticipates even the most challenging situations, where one's fidelity and commitment are heavily tested.<sup>32</sup> Benedictine stability is not a naive idea about the world but rather a conviction that in a fleeting and chaotic world, one can still maintain at least a stable character and a sense of purpose.<sup>33</sup>

Second, there is the question of how precisely one can practice Benedictine stability in a very overwhelming context. The most important yet perhaps most difficult thing to do is to resist the temptation to escape or avoid difficulties in the situation one is facing. As Casey says, stability protects the process of purification when we are experiencing pain in a particular context: "We are tied down under the surgeon's knife."<sup>34</sup> In terms of what practical things what a person can or should do, one can do as much or as little one can manage in a particular situation. For some, the SHO actually opens up time to pick up new hobbies, such as stargazing,<sup>35</sup> and to set regular times for prayers. For others, life can be very hectic and frustrating with constant sleep deprivation. Even then, one can still take a few deep breaths and enter into moments of prayer.

Third, there is the question as to whether non-religious people would be able to adopt Benedictine stability. It would seem that they might find themselves undergoing a completely novel experience because they do not embrace the entire Christian metaphysical worldview that underlies the Benedictine tradition. To clarify the challenge, let's look at the practice of mindfulness that has been recently gaining interest from non-religious people. Louchakova-Schwartz has shown that the practice of mindfulness among non-religious people is different from the original Buddhist practice of mindfulness because the former is not concerned with eschatology, enlightenment, or other canonical Buddhist psychology.<sup>36</sup> Without these metaphysical frameworks, the non-religious practice of mindfulness seems to be more focused on the structure of consciousness itself, which consists of a deep awareness of self and an intersubjective perception. Similarly, non-religious people, not subscribing to the religious ideation that one's stability is a function of both human work and divine grace, may be unable to adopt Benedictine stability in its entirety, but they might be able to use some of its features. For example, they can focus more on the interplays between change and changelessness, the necessary and the unnecessary, and hope and despair. This experience of non-religious people, which seems to be Benedictine-inspired, is an uncharted territory that is worth exploring.

Fourth, there are abusive contexts that can worsen during the pandemic. Benedictine stability doesn't suggest that one should endure verbal or physical abuse without protesting or seeking help or refuge, just as Benedictine monks are not called to be victimized and abused in a monastery. Benedictine stability is based on the belief that staying put can be a context for progress for those who are able to use the occasion for that purpose. When the context is categorically toxic and unsalvageable, abandoning ship is always available as a last resort. St. Bernard, the founder of the abbey of Clairvaux, thus advises monks to move to a different monastery if their current monastery is too relaxed or corrupt.<sup>37</sup>

31 DeSantis, "Parents 'Cannot Cope with This Insanity' While Homeschooling Kids During Pandemic."

32 Kardong, *Conversation with Saint Benedict*, 76.

33 McMurtry, "Monastic Stability," 223–4.

34 Casey, "The Value of Stability," 293.

35 Graham, "The New Pandemic Hobby."

36 Louchakova-Schwartz, "Non-Religious Mindfulness, Phenomenology, and Intersubjectivity," 442.

37 Roberts, "The Meaning of the Vow of Stability," 262.

## 4 Conclusion

The vow of stability provides a rational way for monks to stay in their physical monastery despite the challenges they face being confined to the same space for a prolonged period of time. First, they move from the world to an enclosed physical space, which is the monastery. Second, they move from simply being in a physical space to being a part of a community or congregation. Lastly, they move from simply being a part of a community to manifesting stability in their community, which involves stability in not only the spatial sense, but also in their character.

People who follow the SHO can learn from the Benedictine vow of stability. First, they can reason that staying at home may bring some benefits similar to those offered by retreats. Second, they can be motivated to address challenges in the institutions where they belong without resorting to escapism. Third, they can use the stability in their social institutions, such as marriage and work, as a context to better their character.

Although religious practices can surely make the pandemic worse, such as what happened in South Korea with the Shincheonji sect,<sup>38</sup> some religious values such as Benedictine stability can thus serve as a rational modulation for people to survive and even thrive during the coronavirus pandemic.

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