

Home Alone with St Jerome... in conversation with Katy Dorrer and Fleur Dorrell.

How do we cope with being at home all day while coronavirus continues to spread?

During this challenging period of social isolation, we decided to consult a few saints. Many years ago, they spent a great deal of their lives in total or partial isolation. So how did they survive?

In this *Year of the Word*, who better to ask than the mighty 4th century St Jerome himself, and his two friends and fellow Bible translators, St Paula and her daughter St Eustochium?

So we caught up with this saintly trio on the very first version of WhatsApp called WhatScroll! WhatScroll's quite a neat device considering its age. It comes with a couple of 'gifs of the Holy Spirit' and a handy voice assistant in Latin called Alexa Divina.

We chat with St Paula and St Eustochium while St Jerome is hard at work in his man-cave in Syria (where he spent 5 years). He said he didn't have time to stop altogether, but he'd chip in now and then.

You created group "Home Alone"

St Paula

Greetings Katy and Fleur!

Bear with us please, as the signal's not great - Jerome's writing yet another commentary, and a whole *host* of angels could visit him at any moment... they have a habit of interfering with the network big time! Wings and a satellite dish shouldn't mix.

St Eustochium

Yep, although we aren't complaining, the angels bless and inspire Jerome in his work to bridge the human and divine.

See here, this painting, now in Londinium, gives you an idea. (The Vision of St Jerome, Domenichino. National Gallery, London)



Fleur & Katy

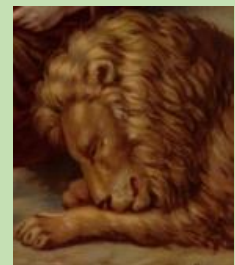
This is amazing 😊 - St Jerome's looking really transfixed. He's pressing his fingers onto his translation. It's spiritual dictation in process. 🖱

St Eustochium

Divine inspiration on the hoof.

St Jerome

😞😞😞😞😞😞😞😞😞 Do you mind!!! I am *trying* to concentrate. How can I do my job with all these 'dings' going off? It's bad enough having this lion snoring away! And yes, I do need to keep my hands firmly on this translation! Precision is everything with the Bible, and these angels come and go like there's no tomorrow.



St Paula

...He's always hangry when he skips lunch. Even the angels end up feeding him most days.



Fleur & Katy

So let's get this straight, the angels help St Jerome translate the Bible AND they cook for him? That beats Deliveroo hands down! What's the best meal they've cooked for you?

St Jerome

"What food, what honey could be sweeter than to learn of God's Providence..?"

St Eustochium

Yes, the Bible is the ultimate 'soul food' – but you don't say no to a good honey cake either.

St Jerome

That's because I don't have them very often, even I like a treat now and then!
When the stomach is full, it's easy to talk of fasting.
Anyway, the angels help me to see better too. My eyes are growing dim with age and to some extent I share the suffering of the saintly Isaac: I am quite unable to go through the Hebrew books with such light as I have at night, for even in the full light of day they are hidden from my eyes owing to the smallness of the letters.

St Paula

Should have gone to *Specsaviours*... if I've told him once, I've told him a thousand times... and in Hebrew, and in Greek and in Aramaic...



St Jerome

Sigh.... You're just showing off. But it is true that your linguistic skills are better than mine and I wouldn't be so far along without your help.

St Eustochium

I've helped loads too. And we've spent ages making copies for circulation. You try getting the Bible out into the open market.
In the Roman world - it's all Greek to them; ...and Hebrew; and ...Aramaic.

St Paula

But we're rushing ahead of ourselves, would you like to know how we all met?

Fleur & Katy

Oh yes please! 🙄

St Eustochium

Mum, start from the beginning.



St Paula

So, Jerome was born in c.342 in Dalmatia (he's 5 years older than me). Like all bright teenagers, he went to Rome where he became a Christian having previously found the Scriptures quite boring compared with the classics! Let's face it – Leviticus or Marcus Aurelius! Not a difficult choice.

While Jerome began his work preparing a translation of the New Testament from Greek into Latin, I had to get married and have 5 children. And he says workwise, he had the lion's share! Don't think so...

The Lion

🐾...Not that joke again....🐾

St Eustochium

Well anyway, Mum was widowed at 32. My Dad was very wealthy so she did all right, and she had a wardrobe to die for. But she missed him loads and got into religion to cope with her grief. We met Jerome in 382, in Rome while he was visiting from Palestine.

Mum was already semi-monastic by then. I was 14 and my Mum was a Desert Mother – try explaining that to your schoolmates.

St Paula

You quickly made a vow of perpetual chastity yourself! We tried very hard to put you off being so holy so young but you wouldn't have it.

St Eustochium

Well you were my biggest inspiration, what else was I going to do? Anyway, Mum had wanted to do a tour of some holy sites, and she let me come, and I loved it. Mum had profound insights wherever we went. You experienced the biblical events as if they were really happening again, didn't you, Mum? I learnt loads.

St Paula

Those were the days... mysticism isn't what it used to be!

St Eustochium

When we met Jerome, we clicked straight away though he thought I was too young for trekking round religious ruins. When I told him the alternative, (be forced into an arranged marriage...) He looked into my eyes and said "Love is not to be purchased, and affection has no price".

So I thought, yep this man is RIGHT where I'm AT.

Then we all went to the Holy Land and Egypt.

And then they decided to run a bed and breakfast in Bethlehem.



St Paula

No, we did NOT. It was a double monastery for men and women, separate buildings I might add – this was the 4th century. You were there Eustochium - so stop winding us up.

Fleur & Katy

So was it in that monastery where you first experienced remote working?

St Paula

Well, let me see. Jerome's written about our monastic days in a lot of detail.

We had one monastery each for our nuns and monks – you know how it is with holy people – they drive each other mad so it's better to keep them apart!

They get SO competitive with their penances... dear me, you should see the lengths people go to, to become a saint. Anyone would think it was the spiritual Olympics.

Fleur & Katy

Hmmm, but aren't you all saints?

St Eustochium

Are we Mum? Thought you had to be dead first?

St Jerome

To saints their very slumber is a prayer. Every day we are changing, every day we are dying, and yet we fancy ourselves eternal...

St Paula

Back to the main story...

We lived and worked separately except for prayer and worship.

St Eustochium

And you ran retreats together. And most of our Bible translation work was done together.

St Paula

OK, true, but that was just us, not the rest of the communities. We were soul mates. So anyway, our 3 year plan to develop a hostel was to help fund the monasteries. We had visitors from all over the place – Ethiopia, Persia and even India. And lots of aristocrats because Jerome had an extensive network of followers. We also built a hospice but the money wasn't enough to keep us going.

St Eustochium

That's because you were always giving it to the poor, Mum; and the cats.

The Lion

Are you talking about me? Is it dinner time?
Or do I have to go hunt for it myself, again? 🐾



St Paula

Only ever has food on his mind that one!
So back to our story, Jerome sold his family's property in Italy and Dalmatia. He had some timeshares and that helped, well for a while anyway... until our enemies attacked our monasteries – dark days indeed.

St Eustochium

Jerome told me that in those days, Mum's ascetic lifestyle was because of her devotion to God and the Scriptures.

St Paula

What do you mean 'those days'? I still am, I'll have you know!

St Eustochium

Every day they discussed the Old and New Testaments, what each book, each chapter, each phrase should say when translated. The provision of an accurate text is paramount; it should always have recourse to its original language. So that *nothing* would lose its meaning in context, and within the context of the whole Bible. And, therefore, every biblical text would be illuminated by sound exegesis.

'Meditate on the law of the Lord day and night'. They would say in unison.

'Learn by heart a portion of the Scripture'.

'Read assiduously and learn as much as you can'.

'Let sleep find you holding your Bible, and when your head nods let it be resting on the sacred page'. Basically - eat, drink and breathe the Bible.

St Paula

I know I was strict and disciplined Sweetie but it was for the Lord. And it wasn't all isolation, I did speak to local clergy and bishops now and then. I had to; otherwise, they might have closed us down. I had nuns to teach and form. And you, young girl.

Fleur & Katy

So when did the full time self-isolation really start?

St Paula

Well it came after really. Jerome needed the quiet and calm. And he hates background noise as it detracts from his conversations with God. Everybody is always talking *to God*. And he says, how can God get a word in edgeways if we don't shut up and listen?

The Lion

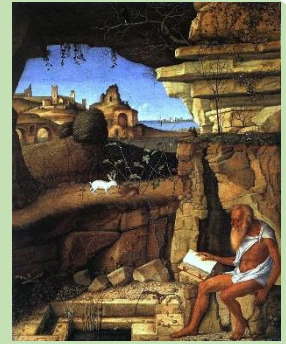
🐾 Pah! He's always chatting to me. 'Fetch this, fetch that'. Grr grr.



St Paula

So Jerome's only way to achieve proper concentration was to flee from Jerusalem where he'd made his name, and hide away where no one could find him. The Monastery was the beginning of that remote working but his man-cave is where it flourished. You can tell by his output. See this painting shows you his cave dwelling pretty well.

(Giovanni Bellini, National Gallery of Art, London)



Fleur & Katy

And looking back, what do you think you and St Jerome can teach us now about self-isolation?

St Jerome

Be ever engaged, so that whenever the devil calls he may find you occupied. If you're listening to the God who speaks then the devil gets bored and hangs up. Love to occupy your mind with the reading of Scripture. Since ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.

Others may have their wealth, may drink out of jewelled cups, be clad in silks, enjoy popular applause, find it impossible to exhaust their wealth by dissipating it in pleasures of all kinds; but our delight is to meditate on the Law of the Lord day and night, to knock at his door when shut, to receive our food from the Trinity of Persons, and, under the guidance of the Lord, trample under foot the swelling tumults of this world.

St Paula

There you go. In a nutshell.

Fleur & Katy

It's hard though isn't it? We're so used to chatting to each other all the time now. Everything is so instant with social media; even if the end goal is just to get likes on your selfies!

St Jerome

The face is the mirror of the mind, and eyes without speaking confess the secrets of the heart. The longer you focus on your face the less you spend on your soul.

Fleur & Katy

Yep, we are all a bit self-obsessed aren't we? Wrong priorities.

St Jerome

It's always been like that in every sphere. Let us learn upon earth those things which can call us to heaven.

And we can only do that in isolation. At least some of the time anyway.

We're not all called to permanent seclusion.

I wouldn't have survived this long without my dearest Paula and Eustochium.

The Lion

And me! 🐾🐾

St Paula

And you too, Jerome. We're a team.

The thing about Jerome is that he needs his books. He's always surrounded by books. Doesn't matter where he is, there's always books.

Fleur & Katy

Like this picture, you mean?

(Niccolo Antonio Colantonio,
National Museum of Capodimonte,
Naples, Italy.)



The Lion

🐾 See, I'm there too! Books weren't Jerome's only companion. 🖱

St Paula

Books, books, books.

He was always saying – 'Make knowledge of the Scriptures your love.' And that's exactly what our life's been about.

Way back then, I helped Jerome in his translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin. It was my suggestion, and I provided the reference works necessary for this project. As I was already versed in Hebrew and Greek, I edited Jerome's manuscripts. And Eustochium copied the work for circulation.

St Eustochium

Well thank you very much Mum! I did more than that!

I could read classical Greek and Hebrew too and I was always helping you two out when you'd had enough.

St Jerome

What they're trying to say, in answer to your question, is that self-isolation is about collaboration. You need to know your strengths, and the strengths of others.

When you're literally on your own all day, every day, who you going to rely on? For me it's God. It's the angels, it's...

The Lion

Me! 🐾👤

Fleur & Katy

But we've only been social distancing since March and it's tough even when we can talk to our friends and family. You've been doing this for years!

St Jerome

We must love Christ and always seek Christ's embraces. Then everything difficult will seem easy.

Fleur & Katy

Any other top tips we can share?

St Jerome

Be at peace with your own soul, then heaven and earth will be at peace with you.

St Paula

It's time we told you the story about the lion.

The Lion



St Eustochium

It's all in the Golden Legend... Jerome was...

The Lion

Errrrr, don't you think I can tell my own story?

This is how it was.
It happened so fast...

Running in the wilderness - hunting wild boar,
Trying to go quicker, then hurting my front paw.
Yelping out in pain - with a scratchy, prickly thorn,
Coming out of nowhere, I see a man forlorn.



Staring right inside my soul - offers me his hand,
Pouncing lions are weak, when they cannot aim to land.
Smiling as he takes the thorn - gives me my new name,
Blessing me forever, while making me quite tame.

Loving my new master – I follow his way home,
Reading books and manuscripts, everywhere a tome.
Protecting one who saved me – fur and mane stand proud,
Sleeping til the end of time, I will be his shroud.

Fleur & Katy

That's so beautiful. We can't stop crying! 😊😊
And what is your name?

The Lion

Hermen. ... short for Hermeneutics. 🧠

Fleur & Katy

Well thank you everyone, that was fascinating! Thank you SO much. Any final thoughts to help us with our social distancing?

The Lion

Never bite the paw that feeds you. 🐾

St Jerome

There are things in life that are bigger than ourselves. Life is short, live it well.

St Paula

And here's our last holiday snap. That was a great break.
A reminder that isolation doesn't last forever and you can look forward to being together again soon!

(St Jerome with St Paula and St Eustochium.
Zurbaran, National Gallery of Washington, USA.)

