Given a choice between reading a government report and getting a root canal, I would ordinarily opt for the latter. Yet several people I respect commended the recent advisory study released by the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy: “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: On the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community,” and so I read it in one sitting. The stark account of the negative effects of felt social disconnection and loneliness caused by several factors—including but not limited to technology use—was not surprising, but still sobering. The report is not all doom and gloom; there are observations and recommendations that give reason for hope.

Yet, ultimately, what struck me is that the study is issued by an executive branch that often seems pitted against a biblically-based understanding of the human person in community along with the values upheld by our Catholic moral teaching, but here the opposite is the case: the findings and conclusions in fact correspond quite readily with claims about human identity, relationships, and flourishing proposed in the Catholic tradition of philosophy and theology. Human beings are inherently social beings; relationships with each other and active participation in society are essential aspects of human nature; and belonging to a community of faith with diverse members is one of the more salutary factors contributing to human health and well-being.

There is not enough space here to summarize the whole study, so I encourage readers to check it out themselves (https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf). Instead, this month and next I will compare several points raised in the advisory report with reflections on loneliness and belonging by Jean Vanier, the late French-
Canadian founder of the L’Arche communities for persons with disabilities. (I acknowledge that the credible posthumous claims about Vanier’s conduct may have disgraced his reputation, but I don’t think they invalidate the practical wisdom contained in his writings; compare Mozart, who may have been a cad and a scoundrel, but still he composed some truly magnificent symphonies that I believe truly glorify God.) Further, I will draw ties to both our diocesan vision and mission that emerged from our recent strategic visioning process, AND to a Catholic understanding of the mystery and meaning of the Eucharist in this month when we celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi and the beginning of the third, yearlong parish phase of the national Eucharistic Revival.

The glossary at the beginning of the surgeon general’s advisory includes words defined in secular terms but consistent with a Catholic attitude toward reality: ‘belonging’, ‘loneliness’, ‘social cohesion’, ‘solitude’, and ‘trust’ speak to common experience informed by faith. ‘Social cohesion’, for instance, integrates several key themes; it is defined as, “The sense of solidarity within groups, marked by strong social connections and high levels of social participation, that generates trust, norms of reciprocity, and a sense of belonging.” Social cohesion is congruent with ‘communion’ in a Catholic lexicon, which I define as: ‘the mutual bond that exists among persons in relation who entrust themselves to one another.”

‘Loneliness’, in contrast, may be paraphrased as the felt distress arising from a sense of isolation or inadequate connections, which occurs when there is an unmet need to belong and interact in individual and group relations with others. The measurable effects of loneliness and social isolation are stark: they increase the risk for premature death by 26% and 29%, respectively, which exceeds the risk for premature death caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day! “In the U.S., stress-related absenteeism attributed to loneliness costs employers an
estimated $154 billion annually.” Half of U.S. adults in 2022 reported experiencing loneliness, which follows when one learns that only 39% feel closely emotionally connected to others.

Yet, there are some counterintuitive findings in the advisory study: while the pandemic might be implicated in a surge of loneliness, the numbers are roughly the same: 1 in 5 Americans feel more disconnected as a result of the pandemic; a similar number actually feel more closely connected to others. And while persons over 65 might be suspected to have the highest incidence of loneliness, it is actually young persons who are most acutely lonely, which makes sense when one learns that people today spend 24 hours more per month alone than they did in 2003.

Coupled with this trend is the fact that for young persons aged ages 15 to 24, “time spent in-person with friends has reduced by nearly 70% over almost two decades, from roughly 150 minutes per day in 2003 to 40 minutes per day in 2020”—a decrease of 20 hours per month. And despite the proliferation of online communities and Facebook ‘friends’, the ‘social network’ of respondents indicated that roughly half of Americans in 2021 had three or fewer close friends as opposed to only 27% with such a limited circle of friends in 1990. And yes, as suspected, the pandemic further significantly shrunk the average ‘circle of life’ by 16%.

Sadly, many have come to regard loneliness as the “new normal”: “less than 20% of persons who often or always feel lonely or isolated recognize it as a major problem.” While the experience of loneliness may be endemic to the human condition, Vanier has a mixed regard for this soul state. In his work, “Becoming Human,” he observes that loneliness can appear in its more mild forms as a “faint dis-ease, an inner dissatisfaction, a restlessness in the heart.” In its more malignant forms, “loneliness can feel like death,” as it breeds apathy in the elderly, those with disabilities, or leads to depression in the wake of the subjective chaos that threatens to
swallow all persons’ sense of peace and purpose. The chaos caused by the absence of connections can foment the temptation to think that all love is an illusion, that few are to be trusted, and that letting down the psychic barriers which reinforce our self-imposed isolation is only a recipe for further hurt. Vanier’s captures the sense that something is amiss in his familiar refrain: “Life no longer flows.”

Yet, in Vanier’s take on loneliness, not all is negative. Loneliness can never fully be dispelled, because, just as St. Augustine observed, nothing on this created earth, including other human beings, “can completely fulfill the needs of the human heart.” The human restlessness that results from the heart’s longing for the infinite God can be ignored or worse, cancelled, only at the expense of our chance for self-transcendence, for conversion of self and society, for spiritual and social “evolution” to a more mature, inclusive community.

Loneliness, says Vanier, may draw us to the threshold of newfound creative energy that spurs us to “create new things or to seek more truth and justice in the world.” For “artists, poets, mystics, prophets, those who do not seem to fit into the world or the way of society, are frequently lonely.” “Frequently, it is the lonely man or woman who revolts against injustice and sees new ways.” One thinks of the fiery John the Baptist as a figure who must have encountered both great joy in the newly-conceived Christ, and great loneliness in the face of the injustice, hypocrisy and dissembling of those who ignored or rejected God.

In my pastoral perspective, it takes honesty, self-knowledge, and courage to admit the nagging ache of our loneliness. Loneliness can be self-induced, or it can be visited upon us by circumstances beyond our control such as the pandemic or other experiences of loss or setback. I believe that loneliness is not a result of God’s turning his face from us, for Jesus is always turned toward us, as the Eucharist attests. And belief in his perpetual presence and accompaniment can
be a tether drawing us from a sense of disconnection and isolation to communion. To sow seeds of the Spirit and cultivate connections in Christ is a prophetic act of healing, hope, and renewed trust. But more on all this next month.