

Not Only the Lonely—Part II

Last month I drew from the U.S. Surgeon General’s advisory report on “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation” to reflect on the experiences of social disconnection and loneliness faced by persons of all ages in our society, especially young people. I indicated that the report is not all bad news but recognized reasons for hope in areas of society that can help inoculate us against despair. Religious faith that draws us into closer connection with other persons (I would add, including the Divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and that stretches us beyond exclusive ties among like-minded, demographically similar people is vital for human “heart health” on both the natural and spiritual levels.

The report identifies the precious and yet precarious “social capital” of trust and empathy that are both the root and the fruit of social connections.

Trust sparks communication and cooperation, and improves population health, economic prosperity, and social functioning—goods of a natural and supernatural order. For Christian believers, trust finds its ultimate source in Jesus, whose Divine Mercy softens the antagonism and wariness we have toward others when we regard them as strangers. Mercy attends trust and generates deeper trust when we see one another as recipients of a love we did not merit, but mutually, deeply desire.

The report highlights a “virtuous cycle” between a sense of social connection and a disposition to engage in volunteer service. We commend adults who devote some of their summer vacation time such as those at Saints John and Paul Parish in Altoona to accompany young people in Catholic Heart Workcamp mission experiences assisting in home repair

projects, feeding the hungry, assisting at social agencies, and overall serving as ambassadors of joy for children, the elderly and disabled. The cultivation of an appetite for service is a lifelong gift that blesses others and oneself; it infuses love into neighborhoods and other vacant “deserts” where isolation and loneliness prevail. As Pope Francis observes in *Fratelli tutti*, his message on fraternity and social friendship, “Only a gaze transformed by charity can enable the dignity of others to be recognized and, as a consequence, the poor to be acknowledged and valued in their dignity, respected in their identity and culture, and thus truly integrated into society” (FT n. 187).

The Holy Father and the Surgeon General concur that human flourishing depends on diversifying social relationships beyond our own background groups, power status, and generation. The social decline of “core discussion networks” composed of people with whom we have conversations about world events, politics, health, leisure activities, and religion correlates with the degree of societal polarization fueling skepticism and animosity among political and even religious groups. Pope Francis enlists Gabriel Marcel where he comments, “I communicate effectively with myself only insofar as I communicate with others.” We need to encounter real faces to love who stretch us beyond our families and small groups. “Our noblest social instincts can easily be thwarted by self-centered chats that give the impression of being deep relationships.” “Close groups and self-absorbed couples that define themselves in opposition to others tend to be expressions of selfishness and mere self-preservation” (FT n. 87).

I can detect the resonances of the Holy Spirit surfacing in the report’s advocacy for “building a culture of connection” founded on the core values of kindness, respect, service, and commitment to one another, and our own recent expression of our Diocese of Des Moines’ vision and mission, centered on the call to CULTIVATE CONNECTIONS IN CHRIST.

Through various forms of encounter with Jesus, especially in each other and in the Eucharist, the

invitation to friendship with him draws us together in communities where life flows freely, and gratitude becomes our graced response to all we experience, even if it involves hardship and suffering.

As our vision statement proclaims, Jesus is not simply the loving “giver” who pours out his body and blood, his very life for others. He shows us God’s humility in not being afraid to share his “need” for us. God’s truest friends, including saints such as St. Teresa of Calcutta, know that he still thirsts for souls to whom we are called to show love, to reveal that whatever we do for the hungry, naked, imprisoned, the vulnerable and least among us, we do for him. And in the process, these connections sown and sealed in the Spirit endure forever.

We do not need to digitally alter our image or our story. Jesus wants to incorporate our story into his story, which is more incredible than anything we could have imagined. God is revealed to be for all eternity a Trinity of persons perfect in love and relationship, united in being God and yet not a closed, gated community to which we cannot gain access. The Father sends his Son in the fullness of time so that we can participate in the *communion* of love who is God, thanks to Jesus becoming God-with-us, both human and divine in the wonder of the Incarnation. Jesus greatly desires to eat and drink with us as he did with disciples and the multitudes drawn around him. He then fulfills his desire to BECOME food and drink for us in the mysterious, miraculous gift of the Eucharist.

Three years ago this month, the Vatican Dicastery for the Clergy reflected on the evolving nature of the parish as the lynchpin of faith life: “With the Parish no longer being the primary gathering and social center, as in former days, it is thus necessary to find new forms of accompaniment and closeness. A task of this kind ought not to be seen as a burden, but rather as a challenge to be embraced with enthusiasm.”

The parish is no longer primarily a geographical territory, but a “living space” in which the potential for connections exists. We cannot be trapped in nostalgia for the past or simply remain locked into activities at the parish or other levels that are a “sterile attempt at survival,” permitting indifference and disconnection to prevail.

I do not believe that God’s Spirit wills this diminishment for us as a people who have been richly anointed and blessed by God with the stimulus of the Gospel pulsing through our ears into our hearts and minds. I believe that with the guidance of the recently revived Diocesan Pastoral Council, its partner commissions, and other “organs” in the Body of Christ already initiating new modes of connection within and beyond parishes, that any epidemic of loneliness and disconnection will be checked. Where we are now as a society and a Church will yield to something beautifully human, mysterious divine, and evangelically potent. I do not fully comprehend how this mission will play out and precisely what shape it will take, but I invite you to accompany me and so many others who share this vision so that we can resurrect trust and delight in the life-giving connections God proposes to us in Christ.