

LONELINESS

BY ARMAND GEORGES

It is the glory of the Church that, throughout her history, she has cared for men and women in their need. St Paul refers to the giving of alms to the poor on several occasions. The Church was the first body ever to nurse and treat the sick without making a charge for doing so. For hundreds of years, the beggars and the needy came to the monasteries, knowing they would not be turned away empty-handed.

The Church, in fact, has always given practical help, as well as sympathy and affection, to men and women according to their need. It is the Church, indeed, which has aroused the consciences of men to their duty towards one another, and especially to the old and the weak, the widow and the fatherless, those distressed in any way in body, mind or spirit.

It is because of the teaching of the Church that the State was persuaded to make provision for people in need. Men more and more realized that they were brothers, and so they pressed for measures which took care of the old, the sick in body and mind, children who were without parents, those who were unable to work because of some physical handicap or because there was no work for them.

Because the State has done so much during the last twenty-five years, there has grown up a feeling that there is now little for anyone else to do. This view is false, as there are many needs which the State cannot meet. It might make provision for the physical needs of every man, woman and child in the country, but there are other needs which no State will ever be able to meet.

In fact, there is in Britain a very large body of people who are in great need. The State might do something to protect and help them, but it can never meet their underlying and greatest need. I am referring, of course, to the lonely.

It will shock many people to learn that in Britain, at this moment, several million people are lonely. We hear a great deal about the evils of overcrowding, and they are serious indeed. But there are serious evils arising from isolation and loneliness. Indeed, so burdensome becomes loneliness for some people that they take their own lives. In fact, of all those who commit suicide annually, no less than one-fifth are those who live by themselves.

Lonely people tend to suffer from nervous troubles. They become depressed and even despairing. They also tend to become suspicious and hostile towards society. They feel that they have been neglected and ignored. What is worse, they often feel that they are of no value to anyone. They develop such an ingrained feeling of inferiority, it is difficult indeed to persuade them that they are of real worth in themselves. And it is this feeling of inferiority which can make helping these people such a delicate and difficult task. The really hard thing to do is to persuade them that they have value in themselves.

Of the several million people who live alone in Britain, not all are the victims of loneliness. But it is my experience, after ten years devoted to the study of this problem, that something like half of them are. And this is a formidable total, and truly appalling when it is assessed in terms of human misery.

The root cause

The truth is that most lonely people feel that something has isolated them from society. This may be something that has happened to them, or it may be something they have done themselves. But one thing can be said with absolute certainty : the majority of lonely people can trace their plight to some failure in home and family life.

This is the case of Jim, who lives in a West Riding town. He was born to an unmarried mother, and his mother never married. She was persuaded to trust a man before she had married him, and she paid dearly for that mistake. Unhappily, her son is paying and seems destined to pay far more.

At the age of thirty-eight, he has lost his mother and his only relatives are an aunt and a couple of cousins. He has a quite adequate income and lives in a pleasant house in a good neighbourhood. He is, in fact, a good companion—when he is forced to be. Unfortunately, he has never shown any desire to marry, and he shows little inclination to make friends.

Like thousands of others, he feels that he is inferior, and, in this case, he feels inferior because he was an

illegitimate child. Although he is not yet forty years old, he is neglecting himself. He does not take the trouble to dress up and go out at evenings or week-ends. He has no interest in any social organization of any kind. The efforts of those who wish to reach him, because they realize his position, are rendered useless by his failure to respond.

He is invited to several places, but, although he says he will accept the invitations, he invariably fails to do so. He does not take an interest in anything except his work, and there is every reason to fear that he will take ever less interest in himself. He wears shirts that are threadbare and holey. He fails to shave and to clean his teeth. He does no more in the house than is essential.

This is a case, in fact, of a man seeking refuge in isolation. Because of his illegitimacy, he feels that he is inferior to those around him. He cannot be happy with them. He cannot persuade himself that anyone can want him for his own sake. Gradually, people will lose interest because their attempts to reach him fail. Jim's future, in fact, promises to be very bleak indeed. Ahead looms a lonely middle and old age, when he will be offensive because of self-neglect.

Jim is a victim of illegitimacy.

Mary, who lives in Lancashire and works in a mill there, always wished to marry. Nobody ever found her attractive enough to approach her. As long as her parents were alive, she was not alone. But both died when she was in her late twenties. She has a sister and a brother, both of whom are married. They would gladly have her visit them regularly, once or twice a week.

Mary, however, feels, just as Jim feels, that nobody, not even her own sister and brother, want her for her own sake. They would tolerate her, she feels, because they happen to be her relatives. But that is not what she is wanting. She has longed—for years now—for someone who would find her worth while in herself. Efforts to persuade her that she is good and valuable company have failed. For Mary, who is more and more turning away from relatives and those who would be her friends, and who is more and more limiting her life to herself, the future is far from promising.

Loneliness among the young

Loneliness is not limited to any age. There are children who are desperately lonely. They are usually the victims of broken homes or of marriages that fail. The lonely child has one sure means of salvation—that of someone giving him affection. This is the one bridge by which he can be safely linked with society. This means more to a child than the best education. If this essential affection is denied to him, there is a serious danger that he will turn against society. The lonely child is the one most likely to become a criminal. Feeling rejected by society, he turns against it.

Young people often feel that their parents do not care about them and do not understand them. In homes where there is no affection between husband and wife, teenagers may feel that the atmosphere is hostile. Often parents do not appreciate the aims and ambitions, the hopes and longings, of their children.

Alan is typical of many thousands of others. He was brought up in a village in Lincolnshire. When he left school at the age of fifteen, he went to work in a Co-operative store. He found the work uncongenial. He felt that there were no opportunities for the kind of improvement he longed for. When he told his parents about this, they showed but little interest. In fact, throughout his life, although they had never been unkind to him, they had shown in him nothing like the interest he needed and should have had.

At eighteen, convinced that his native village could never provide the things he needed, Alan left home and went to London. There, he found a bed-sitting-room. He also found a job. But the job was no better than the one he had left in his Lincolnshire village. It was labouring in a warehouse. He was surprised to discover that London can be much lonelier than any Lincolnshire village. Nobody showed the least interest in him. Those he worked with had their own pursuits and friends and they showed no wish to take Alan into their circle.

When somebody did eventually take notice of him, it was to introduce him to a set which was anxious to sell him purple hearts and to introduce him to drugs which, had he started taking them, would almost certainly have ruined him physically and morally. It was lucky for him that a Catholic priest was aware of the activities of this body and intervened at the right moment. Alan was prevented, almost at the last moment, from taking a course that would have meant his utter ruin. Today, he is a member of the Catholic Church, for the priest took pains to bring him into the fellowship of the Church. But Alan might not have been so responsive to that priest had he not been shocked by the realization that he had, indeed, come perilously near to contracting a habit which few can break, not even when helped

by modern science and medicine.

The young woman who finds her home life so unsatisfactory that she decides to seek romance and more interesting work in London or one of the major cities, all too often finds herself quite cut off from any significant human contact. And she lacks the freedom to seek out friends which is enjoyed by a young man. He can visit clubs and public houses and maybe make friends there. But a young woman doing this is likely to find herself in embarrassing and most unwelcome situations.

My experience has served to convince me that in London, in particular, and also in our large cities, there are many thousands of men and women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five who are without any satisfying human relationship with society. They are isolated, and they are in danger of becoming ever more lonely and ever less capable of making the effort to form associations which would enrich their lives and give them something to live for. I am equally certain that the vast majority of these people would not be in their present plight had their home lives been what they might and ought to have been.

The middle-aged and the old

Higher in the age scale, and more poignant, are the middle-aged and old who are lonely. In large numbers amongst the middle-aged are widows and spinsters. A special word should be said about the spinsters. Some of them have the anguish of knowing that they never appealed strongly enough for anyone to wish to marry them. But many are paying the price for making considerable sacrifices for their parents. Take the case of Miss Meredith. She was an only daughter. When she was in her early twenties she was expecting to marry. But her mother was struck down by disseminated sclerosis. This is a form of paralysis which can affect every part of the body, including sight and hearing, and there is no cure for it.

Miss Meredith, who had a great affection for her parents, did not hesitate to break her engagement and devote herself to her mother. For sixteen years she nursed her mother and looked after her father and the home. Then her mother died. By this time, Miss Meredith was thirty-eight, and hopes of marriage were small. But her father broke down, no doubt because of the burden of having a sick wife for so many years. He was found to have angina. For Miss Meredith there followed almost six more years in which she cared for her father.

She was forty-four when her father died. A woman of a most unselfish nature, excellent in the home and a lover of children, she would have made a first-rate housewife. But it was too late. What is worse, her concentration on her parents and the home had caused her to lose contact with former friends and acquaintances. She was very much on her own.

Miss Meredith came to my notice during my investigation of loneliness in Britain. She was not a Catholic, but I brought her case to the notice of a Catholic priest. Because of his position, he was able to visit her frequently, and he managed to persuade her that she was a woman of considerable worth whom the Church would welcome. Today, she is fully occupied with work for the Church. But had I not found her and informed that Catholic priest of her need, she would almost certainly be living in great loneliness and in a state of almost unbearable unhappiness.

There are many spinsters who are alone because they sacrificed themselves for their parents or, in some cases, for a sister or brother. There are many who would have been married had it not been that the war or an accident robbed them of the one whom they meant to marry. But all are in danger of being isolated and of feeling that life has passed them by. And it is this feeling that is so dangerous. This sense of being of no worth or interest is the cause of so many living with the conviction that nobody cares for them because they are not worth caring about. When this state of heart and mind has been reached, helping these people presents considerable problems.

The most moving and by far the most numerous cases of loneliness are to be found amongst old people. The causes of loneliness here are legion. They may be traced right back to childhood. Generally, they are lonely, those who are sixty-five and over, because they have lost their life's partner. Often they are so much alone because they have never been married and all relatives have either died or long since forgotten they existed.

Illness, which may include a partial failure of sight or hearing, but which is not of the kind calling for hospitalization, results in quite a number of cases of loneliness.

Breakdown of family life

What must be emphasized is that it is a failure or a breakdown of family life which explains almost all the cases of loneliness. The breakdown may be due to the death of a husband or wife. But the failure may be that of divorce, separation, a too feeble attempt to make the marriage a success, an insufficient effort to understand children.

At a time when many so-called experts in human relationships are challenging marriage and describing it all too often as an inadequate human institution which should be discarded, it cannot be too strongly stressed that the failure to preserve a marriage may well lead to a lifetime of isolation and distress. The surest way to increase the incidence of loneliness is to increase the number of divorces and separations of husbands and wives. That is sure to result in one partner being lonely, and it all too often leads to loneliness for a child or young person.

It must also be further stated that the growth of illegitimacy is bound to result in an increase in the number of lonely people. The child who lacks a father may not be adversely affected by the knowledge that he or she is illegitimate. But I know of several cases, even in these so-called broad-minded days, where the knowledge of illegitimacy has caused a feeling of inferiority.

In other words, the Church must proclaim with greater emphasis than ever before that marriage is not only sacred and a divine institution, but that it is the strongest safeguard against countless serious human ills. As long as the family remains an integrated unit, every member of it has a centre of safety and vital links with society. The moment a marriage disintegrates, its members become separated units, in danger of loneliness and all the evils that may flow from their isolation.

Our major task, however, is that of dealing with the lonely we have in our midst now. Their number, I estimate, is several million people. Of these, something like 2 million are old people, and of the total, about three-quarters are women.

The State has done little for the lonely. It has done much for the old and this means that many lonely people have been helped in their loneliness. But this has been accidental, as it were. It has been the result of a lonely person becoming ill and so being removed to an old people's hospital for treatment. Or it has been the result of an old person reaching a stage of incapacity, due simply to age itself, or to the failure of a vital faculty like sight, when the authorities have been compelled to remove that person to a home for the aged. When such things happen, an old person no longer lives alone. But they may have so lost the desire for company that they take no interest in those about them.

The challenge

The lonely present very special problems. To find them is the first difficulty. Those wishing to help the sick or blind, orphans or old people, can readily find them in hospitals, homes and other institutions. But the lonely are not to be found at any centre. They are spread throughout the large towns and cities. They have to be sought.

Finding them, however, is not as difficult as may appear at first sight. An excellent source of information on the whereabouts of lonely people in any area is the District Nurse. These nurses are certain to know where old and lonely folk are to be found, as they will be visiting them regularly and, in some cases, frequently. These nurses, incidentally, often do a great deal for the old and lonely that is far in excess of what is required of them in the course of their duties.

Another way of finding out where lonely people are to be located is to consult the electoral register. This is certain to prove most informative, and it is almost certain to astonish by disclosing what a large number of people live alone in a parish or a ward. For instance, when I began my investigations into the causes and extent of loneliness, I went through the electoral register of a village that had just over 2,000 adults in its population. Of these, the register revealed, no less than 138 lived alone.

But in the cities and large towns the number is likely to be much higher. In fact, my investigations strongly suggest that the average number is from 75 to 85 to the 1,000 in many areas.

Of course, not all the people who live alone are lonely. Many are thoroughly integrated into society, having associates and associations that have been theirs for many years. Even so, as every priest and doctor knows, of those who live alone, at least half are very isolated. Apart from official visits from doctors, nurses, meter readers and tradesmen, they have no callers.

This is a challenge to the Church. Because loneliness is less obvious than such human ills as sickness and blindness and hunger, it is all too often overlooked. But it ranks as one of the major evils in our society. We have already seen that it can be a killer—a killer of the heart and the emotions and, in extreme cases, of the body itself. And I have thousands of letters which testify to the suffering it causes. Here are extracts from a few.

From a middle-aged widow in Coventry: ‘I feel so desperate. I had no skill in my fingers when my husband died, and we had the misfortune to have no children. I am doing uninteresting work as a canteen assistant. But that would not matter if only someone were interested in me. I am sure a friend would make all the difference to my life’.

The following was contained in a letter from a woman of about sixty who lives in Battersea: ‘Your letter was the best thing that has happened to me for a long time. To think that you would take the trouble to sit down and write to someone you don’t really know and to show such interest! I feel I might have been wrong about life for the four years since my husband died. Perhaps people do care, after all’.

This one, from an old-age pensioner in Leytonstone, echoes the sentiment I have found in so many others: ‘I am writing to thank you for visiting me on Wednesday afternoon last week. You came at a time when I was so down I could not have told anyone how badly I felt. Do you know, I have thought many times lately of ending my life? Being alone here, week after week and month after month, was becoming more than I could stand. That you and your wife should show such interest has made me feel that things might well become better for me’.

A letter, a visit lasting only half an hour, can make all the difference to a lonely person. But it would be wrong to assume from this that all anyone needs to do is acquire a list of lonely people and then call on them, and that all will then be well.

Visiting the lonely

Visiting the lonely calls for a special kind of understanding. It does not require the power to converse brilliantly, nor any great scholarship. But it does require a knowledge of the persons being visited. For many people who have been lonely for a long time, and only for a few months in some cases, will not show any obvious welcome for a stranger. Such people are likely to be suspicious and sour, self-centred and far from bright company.

I have visited several old women who have lived alone for a long time, and my reception was far from cordial. Some were morose and were reluctant to talk. Others were very pessimistic and could foresee nothing happening that would brighten their lives. Some were full of complaints about the way life had treated them. Others talked—sometimes in most unwelcome detail—about their illnesses and ailments.

All these attitudes are reactions to being alone too much and having far too much time to think about themselves. Inevitably, people in isolation think more and more of their own fate and they feel that it is unhappy and unjust.

Visitors to hospitals know that they are likely to see sights which are not pleasant. Visitors to the old and lonely are likely to find that they hear things and see attitudes that are far from pleasing. But such visiting is on the same level as that of a doctor. The visitor to the lonely does not take pills and medicines as a doctor does for the sick. But he takes the means of healing and restoration.

What are these? They are new contacts for the isolated. They are cheerful and hopeful conversation, a genuine desire to help and the determination not to be discouraged by initial reactions which are unpromising.

Before paying a visit to a stranger, it is wise to learn something about the attitude of the person to be visited. The District Nurse will know whether a lonely person is bitter or resentful, full of self-pity, or is reasonably cheerful. She will also be able to supply background information that will make it easier for the visitor to make contact and to converse readily from the moment of meeting.

Visiting is not the work of one person. It is better done by two people. When the person to be visited is a woman, two women should make the call. With a man, a married couple are likely to prove most effective. The great need and aim must be to make the lonely person feel that action is being taken solely for his or her sake. There must be no suggestion of patronage; no hint that the hope is of persuading the lonely one that he or she would be wise to join the Church, for instance.

There is no need to go armed with gifts, although a bunch of flowers is always a most gracious form of gift, if there is a reluctance to go empty-handed. But the aim is to make the lonely person feel that he or she is regarded as being of

considerable worth. And the visitor who succeeds in persuading a lonely person of this has done something that is truly great and infinitely worth while. For the lonely ones are usually cursed by a sense of worthlessness.

This is almost always the result for someone in a broken family or marriage. If this results in loneliness, then the sense of being of no account develops and it steadily deepens. The cure is to induce a sense of personal value. If this is achieved, then everything else will follow.

The members of the Catholic Church might well consider establishing what might be called Visiting Teams. There can be no doubt that they would meet a great need in present-day society. It would be their duty—and joy—to seek out lonely people in their area—the lonely ones being of all ages.

Having found these people, they would then learn enough about them to know what to expect on their first visit.. This would prevent a false approach being made. It would also guard against visitors expecting too much and being disappointed by a none too friendly reception.

One thing the visitors can be sure of; provided the lonely person is not suffering from melancholia or some other condition calling for specialized treatment, their visits will be welcomed. Indeed, my experience shows me that there is such gratitude for visiting that it can rarely find anything like adequate expression.

I spent less than an hour with an old man who was confined to his room because of rheumatism. He wrote to me two days later: ‘Do, do come again. The fact that you have been here has made me feel as if I had escaped from prison’.

An old lady whom I visited and promised to visit again, wrote to me: ‘Whatever you do, please, please, please don’t break your promise about coming again.

You were the first person to talk to me who didn’t have to for months. I felt uplifted—blessed. I have been thanking God for you ever since’.

Anyone who visits lonely people will find letters like the above reaching him every day. For loneliness requires great fortitude if it is not to prove demoralizing, and this is particularly true when the lonely are old or disabled. A spinster of seventy-seven said to me: ‘Nobody comes except you. I feel sometimes as though I must go to the door and invite in the first person who happens to come along’. A person feeling like that is getting very near to breaking point. Yet there are hundreds of thousands like her.

Of course, there are lonely people in hospitals and old people’s homes as well as in homes for the blind and physically handicapped. These, too, are wonderfully helped by visitors. But here several well-intentioned people make a mistake. They visit, but they visit everybody. What makes the great difference is the visitor who goes to see just one person. That visited person feels that he or she is being given a special significance. And it is this sense of having a special significance with someone that is so very important.

I shall always remember calling to see an old man in a home for old people. When I reached his bedside, I could see that he was in a most cheerful mood.

‘Do you know who came to see me yesterday?’ was his greeting. ‘Why, Alfred Watson. You remember me telling you about him. We worked together. And he came all the way from Nottingham just to see me’.

That is what particular visiting means. The lonely person, whether he is in his own rooms, house or bed sitting-room, or in some hospital or home, responds wonderfully to anyone who makes him feel that effort and sacrifice have been made just for him.

Fellowship in the Church

Of course, no conscientious Catholic could omit the need to bring everyone—and especially the lonely—into the wide and wonderful fellowship of the Church. This is the greatest service a Catholic can do for the lonely person. But this should come only after the lonely person has been persuaded that he or she is regarded as of great worth for their own sakes.

When this has been achieved, the next step should be, with the help of the priest, to make this person aware that the Church is a communion to which all are welcome. And the Catholic has, in this respect, the greatest message man has ever heard or ever can hear. For here the matter of unworthiness is of prime importance. We all know that we are unworthy of the love of God and of the gift of his Church. If St Paul and St Peter felt this, then it is not surprising that

we, who are so much smaller, should share their sense of unworthiness.

In other words, every Catholic knows that he shares a fellowship of which he is unworthy. It is in that spirit that he invites the lonely one to share in that fellowship. And to one who has felt unworthy of notice, he offers a world-wide community in which he or she is equal before God. And it is not merely a human fellowship that he offers. It is a divine communion that can only be broken by selfishness and sin. In other words, the Catholic offers the lonely person a fellowship that endures for ever and which time and place cannot break.

Here, as every Catholic knows, is the deepest and truest answer to loneliness. It is, of course, the unfailing care and love of God. A man or woman truly aware of the love of God the Father can never again feel lonely and unwanted. In that knowledge is his salvation, his life and his lasting joy.
