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GUEST COMMENTARY

Did Mary Suffer From Loneliness?

Pope Francis has focused our attention on one of his familiar themes – the problem of loneliness in our contemporary culture.

The pope has written about this issue in his messages for the World Day of the Sick, for Lent and for this year's World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly, to be celebrated on July 28, in conjunction with the feast day of Jesus' grandparents, Ss. Joachim and Anne.

"It is not good that man should be alone," he wrote for the World Day of the Sick, citing the Book of Genesis. "From the beginning, God, who is love, created us for communion and endowed us with an innate capacity to enter into relationship with others. Our lives, reflecting in the image of the Trinity, are meant to attain fulfillment through a network of relationships, friendships and love, both given and received. We were created to be together, not alone." Precisely because communion is so deeply rooted in the human heart, he wrote, the experience of abandonment, solitude, vulnerability and insecurity associated with serious illness can be frightening, painful and even inhuman.

In his Lenten message Pope Francis spoke of Lent as a time to pause in prayer and in the presence of a wounded brother or sister.

"Love of God and love of neighbor are one love," he wrote. "Not to have other gods is to pause in the presence of God beside the flesh of our neighbor."

Prayer, almsgiving and fasting are not three unrelated acts, he said, but a single movement of openness and self-emptying, in which we cast out the idols and attachments that imprison us, enabling our atrophied and isolated hearts to be revived.

"In the presence of God, we become brothers and sisters, more sensitive to one another: in place of threats and enemies, we discover companions and fellow travelers. This is God's dream, the promised land to which we journey once we have left our slavery behind."

On the second day of Lent, the Vatican announced the theme for this year's celebration of Grandparents and the Elderly.

Drawn from Psalm 71, the theme is "Do Not Cast Me Off in My Old Age."

The Holy See Press Office announcement noted that in choosing this verse it was the Holy Father's desire "to call attention to the fact that, sadly, loneliness is the bitter lot in life of many elderly persons, so often the victims of the throwaway culture."

"By cherishing the charisms of grandparents and the elderly," the press release reads, "and the contribution they make to the life of the church, the World Day seeks to support the efforts of every ecclesial community to forge bonds between the generations and to combat loneliness."

During the first days of Lent, I've been following the traditional devotion of the seven sorrows of Mary and I've been struck by how alone Mary must have felt in her sufferings.

Her vocation was so singular, and her life so unique, that no one with whom she shared her earthly journey could have fully understood her life experiences, no matter how empathetic they strove to be.

Consider how alone Mary must have felt after the angel's announcement that she had been chosen from among all women to bear the Savior.

Or, how fearful she must have been as she and Joseph hastily packed up their belongings and their newborn baby to flee to Egypt.

Imagine Mary's anxiety when her son was suddenly missing during their journey home from Jerusalem, how confused she must have been when her neighbors in Nazareth chased Jesus out of the synagogue and tried to throw him off a cliff, how sorrowful and lonely she must have felt after the death of her husband, Joseph, and then how lonely she must have been when her Son had left home to pursue his mission.

Finally – although there are many other examples that could be cited – imagine Mary's heart-wrenching sorrow and her sense of abandonment as her Son suffered a hideous death on a cross.

During this Lenten season, pause, as our Holy Father suggests, to reflect on Mary's sorrows as they are portrayed in Scripture.

If you are experiencing loneliness or feel abandoned – no matter the cause – ask Our Lady to help you use your suffering to draw you closer to her Son, who suffered for love of us.

And if someone you know is experiencing pain or isolation, ask for the grace to know how to pause in the presence of this wounded brother or sister and to offer them the consolation of Christ who is always with us.

Our Lady of Sorrows, pray for us.

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