

IDENTIFYING, RESOLVING LONELINESS IN PRIESTLY LIFE

The Priest September 1989

Richard P. Fitzgibbons

Loneliness is one of the most painful of all human conditions because it has the potential to disable and limit laity, Religious and priests.

Adults in every life state have difficulty serving the Lord with gladness when powerful wounds of loneliness burn within their hearts. As a result, many people will go to great lengths to deny that they have struggled with this type of emotional pain.

This denial is accomplished through the power of the intellect, which is the major defense attempted to control all emotional pain.

Many priests may suffer from severe loneliness arising from deep disappointments in relationships during childhood and adolescence. They may be unaware of the actual origins of their difficulties because they have unconsciously used their intellects as defense mechanisms. Thus, childhood and adolescent loneliness can emerge suddenly in adult life.

The victims of such pain often mistakenly think their sadness is exclusively the result of their adult life experiences or commitments. They ignore or deny earlier years of severe emotional disappointments.

As a result, priests may make their major life mistakes in an attempt to escape from their loneliness, and its associated sadness. Without being fully aware of the true causes of such pain.

Loneliness is a very serious, and an increasingly common problem in the lives of priests. This is the result of a number of factors, especially those which interfere with healthy loving relationships in men.¹

Loneliness can be defined as being without company, as not feeling comforted in love, as feeling cut off from others, and not feeling love come into oneself from others, and as experiencing sadness.

For Christians, it can be distinguished from being alone since it is possible to be alone and, at the same time, to feel loved and consoled.

A certain degree of loneliness is appropriate and should be expected, especially in celibates. This pain, however, is felt also by those who have very healthy, loving and sexually intimate relationships.

¹ Fitzgibbons, R.P. "The Origins, Manifestations and Resolution of Conflicts in Priestly Relationships," *The Priest*, Sept. 1985, pp. 38-40.

Inner emptiness

Periodically, happily married parishioners often fall victim to the pain of loneliness even though they may enjoy a good loving relationship with their spouse. Why? Because their needs for a warm, physically affectionate and tender relationship with a father, mother, sibling or peers were not fulfilled earlier in life.

The unrecognized or untreated emotional wounds of loneliness from early life can produce an effect which is similar to that occurring in rheumatic heart disease. Heart damage occurs early in life, but is not diagnosed. It leads to major difficulties, however, in the 30s and 40s.

There are some priests who have been very lonely from lack of joyful, gentle female love from the time they were little boys. This inner emptiness was the result of having mothers who had difficulty in being physically affectionate or in communicating their love.

In adult life, a priest with such a wound may mistakenly think that his loneliness is solely the result of not having an affectionate woman at his side.

Also, priests who may not have been athletically gifted as young boys and who experienced repeated male rejection over many years may believe, erroneously, that only an ongoing homosexual relationship can give them the acceptance and male wholeness for which they have always yearned.

Fortunately, these powerful emotional wounds experienced within the family or community can be resolved.

Loneliness produces numerous physical, emotional, intellectual and behavioral symptoms.

Over the past several years, research studies have shown that loneliness seems to have a very specific effect on the immune system. Particularly affected are the T cells which play a critical role in our ability to fight infections.

These studies have shown that those who are lonely, regardless of age, have a significant impairment in the functioning of their T cells. Loneliness often results in a feeling of physical exhaustion or weakness and in acute or chronic pain for which no organic cause can be found. Common sites for such pain are the head, neck, stomach and colon.

Emotional symptoms seen with loneliness include insomnia, lack of enthusiasm, chronic irritability, anger, sadness, excessive sleeping, listlessness, chronic tiredness, an inner emptiness or void, a lack of joy, and severe depressive or manic-depressive illness.

Many priests report feeling a restlessness or nervousness in the evening when they are alone in their rooms. This is one of the most frequent manifestations of loneliness among priests.

The intellectual difficulties seen with loneliness are a decreased ability to concentrate, to remember and to make decisions; impaired judgment; and a false belief of being unlovable.

**Some priests are isolated because
they have not been treated as
special in family or priesthood.**

The behavioral manifestations include a tendency to avoid people or to constantly be with others superficially, decreased communication, excessive dependency, avoidance of the rectory, and various types of compulsive behaviors such as drinking, excessive eating or smoking, compulsive masturbation, and homosexual or heterosexual acting out.

These are attempts to fill the inner emptiness from various life stages.

Finally, loneliness can cast a cloud over a priest's spiritual life, resulting in a loss of his ability to pray, and a sense of his being cut off from God's love.

If, on the natural level, one does not experience love coming into oneself from others, it becomes very difficult to enjoy receiving Divine Love.

Types of Loneliness

There are multiple types of loneliness depending upon the specific relationship in which a priest's emotional needs were not met.

Many priests fall victim to loneliness in adult life because of a failure to experience a family life in which love flowed regularly between a mother and a father.

This particular emotional pain may predispose a priest to feel very sad in a rectory in which priests do not get along well. It reminds him of the distance and unhappiness between his parents.

Young priests sometimes leave the active ministry after such experiences because they mistakenly believe their sadness is caused solely by their priestly life, and that they will never be happy living in a rectory.

Facing the truth of how loneliness has touched their lives at different developmental stages is very difficult for many priests because of the need to idealize family life.

Fortunately, the pain of loneliness diminishes when all the causes of this emotional disorder are understood clearly.

Finally, a number of priests experience a unique type of loneliness caused by not having athletic gifts when young.

Unfortunately, in our society, when young males lack coordination or interest in sports, they are rejected regularly and repeatedly by their peers. They may even be ridiculed, with their peers frequently hurling the most cruel insults at them, such as calling them a sissy.

These rejections interfere with the development of a positive male image and may result in the victim feeling extremely depressed and often very inadequate as a male.

This type of loneliness is common in men to whom God has given special creative and artistic talents.

Multiple factors in adult life predispose priests to loneliness.

One of the major ones is rooted in the failure in seminary training to communicate the critical importance of receiving love in order to function effectively later as a priest.

Some priests are isolated because they have not been treated as special in family life or in priesthood. This absence of feeling special creates a sense of being unlovable, which fosters a pattern of isolated behavior.

In many parts of the country the most significant cause of loneliness today is the result of the crisis in vocations, leading many rectories to be staffed by only one priest.

Another factor is the failure of priests to experience the rectory as a warm, loving home. In numerous rectories many priests do not appreciate how important it is that the rectory be a place of renewal in love and, subsequently, do not commit themselves daily to that goal.

Unfortunately, in countless numbers of rectories, the brothers do not live together in unity.

Other causes of loneliness in priests are the result of losing close priests friends who have left the active ministry. This may lead to a fear of becoming vulnerable to friendships.

Some priests are lonely because they lack trust in their brother priests. This is the result of hurts at different life stages and in the rectory.

Others fear that close interpersonal relationships result in more stress and pain than in comfort and happiness.

Still other causes of loneliness in priests include an excessive sense of responsibility for activities in the parish. This results in a preoccupation with worries and, subsequently, too little time for ongoing friendships.

A major source of loneliness in many associate pastors arises because pastors exclude them from all important decisions. As a result, the assistant pastors often feel excluded and isolated. Excessive anger, criticism or sarcasm in priests lead others to avoid them.

Of Critical Importance

Finally, a lack of understanding of the critical importance of ongoing friendships with brother priests produces loneliness.

Since loneliness is one of the most painful of all human experiences, we are driven, consciously or unconsciously, to escape its pain. To do that many priests pursue some type of consolation, emotional high, companionship, or warmth.

Drinking is a behavior which can provide a certain warmth to the body. It consoles temporarily. Drugs can also produce a high which will mask, for a period of time, the underlying sadness complex.

Other behaviors, which are attempts to rise above the hurt loneliness, include chronic masturbation, pornography, heterosexual or homosexual acting out, voyeurism, pedophilia, and a preoccupation with dirty jokes.

Still other compulsive behaviors include compulsive television watching, eating, shopping, exercising, and smoking.

Fortunately, the wound of loneliness can be resolved regardless of how long it may have been present in the life of a priest. Numerous lonely individuals take encouragement from the first words spoken about the human condition in Scripture when the Father said: "It is not good for man to be alone."

Other Scripture passages which provide encouragement to those struggling with loneliness include:

"I only need say that I am slipping and your love, Yahweh, immediately supports me. In the midst of all my troubles you console me and make me happy."

"If anyone loves me he will keep my word and we shall come to him and make our home with him."

"He will give a home to the lonely."

Priests who reflect upon these passages regularly come to feel that God would not have spoken thus without meaning to console and comfort His people.

Loneliness is not a curse of the priesthood, as some believe. It can be completely eliminated from the lives of priests by taking certain steps on the natural level and on the spiritual level.

In order to resolve loneliness, the first step is to stop denying and to start recognizing and understanding where loneliness has touched a person's life at different developmental stages.

For many, this is not an easy process.

Regular renewal

Some priests refuse to acknowledge that they ever felt this pain before adult life. They make an emotional investment in blaming other in their adult life for their loneliness.

Others find this process very difficult because they are deeply discouraged. Unconsciously, they often feel that the loneliness in their lives cannot be resolved or healed.

After moving beyond denial, it is important to try to identify the masks of loneliness and the behavioral patterns or temptations caused by the pain of loneliness.

Then the priest has to come to recognize the need to be consoled and renewed in love daily in order to overcome loneliness. It is psychologically and emotionally healthy for priests to come to the realization that they cannot function without being renewed regularly in human and Divine Love.

Some priests have difficulty receiving love because their ability to trust has been damaged at various life stages. If a priest has difficulty trusting in friendships with his brother priests or with the laity, it is probably the result of being hurt either in his family background, in his seminary years, or in his years of priestly ministry.

This mistrust is rooted in anger. Therefore, it becomes imperative to resolve the anger associated with this lack of trust.

Such a priest may need to spend time picturing himself at different life stages. Then, he must try to forgive those who have hurt him at those stages including parents, siblings, peers, fellow priests, religious women and parishioners.

In his process, many priests are surprised to discover how much anger toward their brother priests they have denied.

Resolving anger and forgiving play a major role in diminishing the pain of loneliness. When one has been hurt in important life relationships, the first wound of the heart is sadness, followed by anger. Then the emotion of anger can encapsulate experiences of sadness at different life stages.

In order to resolve the wound of sadness, the capsule of anger must be removed. This can only be done through the process of forgiveness since the expression of anger does not truly free individuals from their inner anger.⁴

Priests benefit greatly by forgiving --- intellectually, emotionally or spiritually ---- at different life stages. This process takes some time, but it is regularly and repeatedly followed by experiences of significant emotional relief.

Family responsibility

Those who have lost their ability to trust must try to live with a more vulnerable heart. Some priests have been hurt so deeply, however, that this movement to vulnerability is almost impossible on a natural level.

Such individuals are helped regularly by asking the Lord for the gift of trust, which is the experience of feeling safe and protected in close personal friendships.

Priests can also diminish loneliness by striving to let go of their excessive sense of responsibility for different aspects of their priestly ministry. This can be accomplished by sharing their ministry with other priests, Religious, and laity.

In addition, the use of meditation can be effective in relieving daily pressures. The use of centering prayer techniques can be very helpful when worries are excessive. They can benefit greatly by meditating twice daily for 10 to 15 minutes on the Lord as being more responsible than they are, or on giving all their worries and concerns to the Sacred Heart.

Some priests are most burdened by an excessive sense of responsibility for members of their families, which may result in their spending their time off at home rather than in rest and recreation with their brother priests or other friends.

Unfortunately, it is not unusual for siblings to put excessive pressure on priests to bear more than their share of responsibility for a sick or aged parent. In such circumstances priests need to be assertive with their siblings and insist that they be treated fairly.

Loneliness also diminishes when a priest is thankful for his very special gifts because appreciating one's God-given beauty enhances the ability to receive love.

Unfortunately, many individuals are unable to receive consoling and refreshing love because they don't like themselves and never did.

Rectory as home

Another major factor in not being able to receive love comes about when priests unconsciously model themselves after a father or other male authority figure who suffered low self-esteem or who had difficulty allowing himself to be loved.

This conflict is extremely common in men in all life states and can be undone by trying to make a daily commitment to repeat a father's good qualities, but not his weaknesses.

Resolving this father-conflict is facilitated also by the use of past-forgiveness exercises.

Loneliness decreases significantly in priests' lives when rectories become truly homes and places of love. Making a rectory a home includes trying to make mealtime pleasant, avoiding competition with one's brother priests, working at enjoying those one lives with, confronting dysfunctional priests, and having the freedom to compliment and praise one's brother priests.

Loneliness also diminishes in rectories when pastors are good team players and welcome the input of assistant pastors in parish decision-making processes.

Some priests have such deep wounds of loneliness they can only be healed in the spiritual dimension of their lives, especially through the use of meditation. These emotional wounds are so deep that no human being's love can fill the emptiness they have in their hearts.

Priests certainly are not the only individuals with such wounds. Many married men, who had emotionally distant mothers, act out sexually in their marriage, even though their wives love them very much. In such cases the love of a wife is not able to make up for the profound wounds of loneliness from childhood and adolescence.

Also, married men may engage in compulsive homosexual behavior because their needs for a father love and/or peer acceptance were never met in earlier critical stages of emotional development in spite of excellent loving and sexual relationships with their wives.

Over the past several years, doctors have increasingly appreciated the powerful therapeutic effects of meditation.

Dr. Herbert Benson, director of the hypertensive clinic at Harvard's Beth Israel Hospital, indicates in his book, *Beyond the Relaxation Response*, the tremendous therapeutic value of meditation for those with hypertension and coronary artery disease.

He recommended spiritual meditation for two 15-minute periods in the particular faith dimension of his patient's lives.

Not Alone

It has also been our clinical experience in treating loneliness in priests, sisters, married and single adults, and adolescents that the use of faith meditation which focuses on the experience and the reality of being loved has powerful therapeutic value in resolving the wound of loneliness.

An example is a 31-one-year-old single woman whose loneliness was producing severe sadness which made it increasingly difficult for her to function at work. The time of day she found particularly difficult was her return from work since there was no one in her apartment to greet her and to lovingly console her.

She was painfully jealous of some of the married women with whom she worked who returned home every day to experience the warmth of love from their husbands and children.

This woman's loneliness diminished significantly when she began spending the first half hour upon her return home meditating on the loving presence of the Risen Lord holding her in His arms.

This young woman would remind herself during that half hour: "I am not alone, the Lord is here loving me. Even though I don't have a husband and children here, the loving Lord is here with me and His love is a great treasure and a source of joy."

Significant relief

Over time, this meditation exercise brought significant emotional relief to this woman. She began to look forward to returning to her apartment daily because it became a place where she experienced great warmth and love.

In this process of using meditation, it becomes important for the individual to recognize the specific type of Divine Love needed to fill his inner emptiness.

In addition, a person needs to recognize his basic human need to be held in love.

For example, in a person suffering loneliness from a distant-father relationship, meditating upon the heavenly Father's loving concern and affirmation in early childhood, grade school, high school, etc., will, in time, fill his inner emptiness.

In someone whose loneliness is the result of not having athletic gifts or not having close friends in the early stages of emotional development, meditating upon the presence of Jesus as a loving brother and the best and closest of friends during times when there was rejection from peers or siblings is consoling.

Mary's presence

This particular meditation is most effective when the individual can imagine the Lord relating to him that He was very special and gifted even though He did not have athletic gifts. When used regularly, this meditation helps heal the male insecurity caused by the absence of such gifts.

In those whose loneliness is the result of having a distant-mother relationship, healing occurs through a process of meditating upon Mary as a joyful, loving woman who is always present and who holds the individual in her arms and heart, just as she did with Jesus.

As the priest meditates upon the joyful and loving presence of Mary in early childhood, grade school, high school, seminary, and priesthood, the emptiness resulting from a distant-mother relationship or from a yearning for more female love can slowly be healed. With this healing comes a feeling of greater wholeness and happiness.

Using rosary beads and meditating on each bead upon Mary's loving and joyful presence, or by asking Mary to comfort in love seems to enhance this healing process.

For those priests who are struggling with a particularly difficult female friendship, meditating repeatedly through the day on Mary as the joyful female in their lives - not X or Y - can be very consoling and liberating.

Best time of day

These meditations seem to be much more powerful and effective when done in the presence of the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. In fact, many priests report a diminishing struggle with loneliness after daily visits to the Blessed Sacrament. Thus, having a small chapel in the rectory can be extremely important to priestly ministry because it can help protect priests from the disabling pain of loneliness.

These meditations must be used regularly. They require discipline and perseverance because of the depth of the wound of loneliness within some priests' hearts, or because of the degree of stress in ministry.

In our own clinical experience using these meditation techniques in treating many priests we have witnessed a total resolution of sadness, inner emptiness, and different types of compulsive behaviors employed in an attempt to escape from this wound.

These faith/love meditations are particularly effective at the beginning of the day, in the evenings, and when an individual finds himself slipping into behavior that is a manifestation of underlying loneliness.

Some priests experience loneliness most acutely at the end of the day. Therefore, this is the time when they find meditating particularly effective. These priests are often helped by spending 15 to 30 minutes each night asking the Lord to heal the pain of loneliness that has touched them at every life stage of their lives.

Meditating on a picture of Mary holding the Christ Child, and reflecting that her love has enfolded them at every life stage can be a source of great comfort and strength to many priests.

Also there is great value sitting in front of a picture of the Lord, and reflecting upon God's love flowing into oneself to strengthen, refresh and renew. In time a priest who had previously been lonely may become overwhelmed by the amount of love that is present in his life. No longer does he feel cheated or empty, but full and joyous.

For many priests there is a significant struggle initially with this process because their emotions try to convince them that they are alone and that they have been alone many time in their lives. In the faith dimension of their lives, fortunately, it is possible to respond to this error in thinking by reflecting that they are not alone and have been alone, or that they are loved deeply and have always been loved.

What occurs is a process that may begin purely as an intellectual or cognitive exercise. However, when employed regularly, there is a movement

from the intellect to the heart. In time, priests can truly feel that they are and always have been loved in very special ways.

Need concerted effort

The use of these meditation techniques may not produce significant results for a number of weeks or months. However, if they are used with perseverance, and if simultaneous steps are taken to build trust and self-esteem and to remove anger, this concerted effort has always been beneficial to those who suffer from loneliness.

These types of faith meditations are also helpful when ministering to the lonely. Frequently, in ministering to others, our own wounds may be touched.

Since the wound of loneliness is the single major area of pain which we deal with in our practices during the day, we have found great value in meditating during the day on the reality of being deeply loved at every life stage. This serves as a source of encouragement and energy in ministry.

Men have a particular need for female tenderness and love to balance their strength, and to refresh and comfort them. From early childhood, males seek comfort from their fears, anxieties and worries in their mother's love. Thus, it is a psychological reality that men need to be consoled and held in female love.

While it is certainly important for a priest to have female friends, it is particularly essential for a celibate to experience Mary as a joyful, consoling woman, whose love can be a source of happiness, warmth and strength,

An obstacle often seen in this process of meditating upon being loved is the difficulty many priests have in setting aside activities and responsibilities, and in trying to be quiet. Many priests really have to work hard at being tranquil and quiet before they can allow themselves to be loved.

Finally, Ordinaries and religious superiors can help priests overcome the pain of loneliness, which is a major contributor to discouragement in ministry,⁵ by being close to and emotionally supportive of their priests, and by sponsoring workshops on techniques for overcoming loneliness, and improving the quality of rectory life.

Once a priest is aware that loneliness is present in his life, he can take specific steps to resolve this pain. This can occur through a process of improving the quality of rectory life and of daily enjoying human and divine love.

⁵ Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry. (1988) Reflections on the Morale of Priests. United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C.

Dr. Rick Fitzgibbons is director of Comprehensive Counseling Services in W. Conshohocken, Pa. He has given many conferences for priests and religious and in 2008 was named as a consultant to the Congregation for the Clergy at the Vatican.