

## “ON A COLD WINTER’S NIGHT”: ENGAGING LONELINESS WITH HOPE

“**The First Noël**” is one of my favorite Christmas Carols. Of Cornish origin (i.e. extreme southwest England), it captures something that we who live in the northern climates relate to quite easily. “On a cold winter’s night that was so deep.” It happens every year at this time in the northern climates. The **long winter** (mild thus far) brings out the worst in many people’s psyche. It is dark and cold, causing people to more easily become isolated. At least we locals can go out to a **restaurant** again! While loosening restrictions has been a good thing, I am convinced that the problem of **loneliness** is a **collateral** effect of the pandemic, though one not discussed openly enough. People need to know that they are not alone in their struggles. Older-age loneliness pre-dates the Coronavirus though it is evidently worse today—much worse in fact.

A June 2020 study from the **University of Michigan** revealed that **56% of people over 50** (that includes me!) said they sometimes or often felt **isolated** from others. That is **double** the 27% who reported this in a similar poll in 2018. That the figure doubled should be a huge cause for concern. Our faith teaches us that God “lives a mystery of personal loving communion” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* # 2331) and we too abide in this communion. The word *communion* means “**being one with**” and connotes how we are called to live in a community of persons. That said, many do not. When you consider that more than **35 million** Americans live **alone** (28% of households), right away we must consider the unique challenges this presents. The area with the highest percentage of people living alone— and by far— was Washington D.C. Perhaps Washingtonians are married to politics! Minnesota **ranks 22nd** in this particular study, with **29.4%** of our households occupied by singles— over 509,000 people. Interestingly, our state also ranks 22nd nationally in total population.

While imprisoned awaiting almost sure martyrdom, **St. Thomas More** authored the work entitled *The Sadness of Christ*. Despite the bleakness of his situation, he remained **steadfast**. He wrote that Jesus, “having made Himself weak for the sake of the weak, He might take care of other weak men by means of His own weakness. He had their welfare so much at heart that this whole process of His agony seems designed for nothing more clearly than to lay down a fighting technique and a battle code for the fainthearted soldier who needs to be swept along, as it were, into martyrdom.” He found **consolation** as he reflected upon the **agony of Jesus** in the Garden. St. Thomas More placed words of comfort into Jesus’ mouth, speaking to him in his loneliness: “See, I am walking ahead of you along this fearful road. Take hold of the border of my garment and you will feel going out from it a power which will stay your heart’s blood from issuing vain fears and will make your mind more cheerful, especially when you remember that you are following closely in my footsteps...”

Loneliness is hardly limited to the elderly. There are fewer outlets for young people. After school activities that brought students together waned, dances were canceled, and young people were discouraged from gathering in **groups**. To think that this does not have a **negative effect** ignores basic human nature. We are **social beings**; very few of us have heard the call to solitude. Rather we thrive in community; we are not “wired” for isolation. The specter of loneliness affects all ages. Many students have yet to set foot in a classroom this year. School Districts may even forego standardized testing this year, anticipating low scores in this “lost” academic year. Without more sustained and regular peer contact, it is easy to imagine **teenagers** defaulting easily into a private world of social isolation, remedied by means of **social media** and increased screen time. The **concerns** accompanying this ought to be obvious. What is our response in faith?

The experience of Jesus in the **Garden of Gethsemane** gave birth to our Catholic idea of a Holy Hour. Can we see **Jesus** as our **very best friend**, especially in times of greater isolation? Having experienced the isolation and forsakenness on a level difficult to comprehend, Jesus is close to the **brokenhearted**. He understands the lonely teenager, who already feeling the lack of sufficient friends, now has even less contact. May they keep in mind that the number of Facebook friends **does not** translate into the same number of meaningful relationships. Far from it. I am convinced that a **few key and trusted friends** can accompany us quite nicely through life. We needn’t have scores of close confidants. But we surely need some. And if those appear to be lacking, make sure that Jesus is #1 on the list.

Jesus is close to the more than **11.2 million widows** and **3.5 million widowers** in our nation, trying to manage

both the **pain of loss** and the adjustments to life without a spouse. In all this, **hope prevails**. Christmas season may be past, but its **key themes** can remain in the forefront of our hearts. We can be people of hope and joy, radiating to the world the difference that the birth of our Savior means in our lives. People can take comfort in the words of the psalmist, knowing that our experience of loneliness is perhaps more universal than we think. Read the **Psalms**: *Ps.* 22: 2-3; *Ps.* 31:13; *Ps.* 38:12; *Ps.* 88:9, 19) or the passages about the suffering servant in *Isaiab* 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; and *Is.* 52:13–53:12. These Scripture passages remind us that we are never really alone. With mutual prayers, may we counter any loneliness with the hope that comes from Christ .

- This Wednesday's inauguration marks the **peaceful transfer** of the Office of the Presidency, as **Joseph R. Biden** will be sworn in as the 46th President of the United States. As good citizens, Catholics are called to **pray for all our government officials**. May our elected leaders truly seek to represent their constituents **without regard** for status or personal belief. Click the link to read Archbishop John Carroll's [1791 Prayer for Government](#), as valid today as 230 years ago.
- The battle for the protection of **innocent human life** continues. Our advocacy must be bolstered by prayer to sustain us. I invite you to attend the annual Prayer Service for Life here at the Cathedral on **Friday January 22**, beginning at **10:30 a.m.** Archbishop Hebda will preside. The Service will also be **livestreamed** online. This day includes a special call to fast and pray for the unborn, and I strongly encourage you to observe this if possible.
- The Holy Father has formalized in Church Law what had been the common practice, opening to lay women the formal ministries of **lector and acolyte**. This effectively removes any direct connection with the “minor orders” of an earlier time. Still, the formal ministries are conferred upon seminarians during formation, though lay men had been able to receive them. It is up to the national Episcopal Conferences to determine how to implement this, so stay tuned. Our first female lector at the Cathedral still admirably serves in this capacity, decades later.
- The third week of January is traditionally the **coldest** of the winter. While mild this year, your help **defraying** the heating costs is crucial. By carefully monitoring our heat, our December bill was **\$8,583**, a savings over last year. Deo gratias! But we still need your help! Envelopes may be found on the tables near the piers.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector