



LUKENOTES

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CASE STUDY

"Father Jeff" • Loneliness

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Following Fr. Jeff's ordination 18 months ago, he was assigned to a rather large suburban parish to minister with a very well-liked and effective pastor, Fr. Tim. In this parish there is a great deal of lay participation with outreach to the poor, both locally and abroad. Fr. Jeff was a bit anxious about being assigned to such a large and challenging parish. Although Fr. Jeff did well in the seminary and feels called to reach out to marginalized persons, he questioned his ability to minister with such an educated and informed laity.

In the past several months, Fr. Jeff has worked very hard to get to know parishioners and to be of service. He works long hours, trying to say "yes" as much as possible to requests for his time. Since arriving, he is steadily gaining weight and is troubled by his clothes not fitting and a growing doubt about his attractiveness. He is trying to watch what he eats but frequently finds himself unable to stop snacking.

Fr. Jeff is also finding it increasingly difficult to find someone with whom to share his day off. His pastor is quite a bit older, with different interests and he takes his day off earlier in the week. His seminary friend, Fr. Steve, is in a neighboring parish and initially they did a few things together. In the last six months, they have hardly seen one another. Fr. Jeff has repeatedly called Fr. Steve, and either Fr. Steve does not return the call or says that he is too busy to do anything together. Recently, Fr. Jeff learned that Fr. Steve had organized an outing with two other former classmates. Fr. Jeff was not invited. Fr. Jeff kept his feelings of disconnection and rejection to himself. He began to spend more time on the Internet and to withdraw from outside activities. When a sensitive co-worker noticed his sadness and asked how he was doing, Fr. Jeff spoke about feeling disconnected. She encouraged him to find someone with whom to talk about his experience as a recently ordained. Fr. Jeff found a counselor who helped him to name and own his experience of profound loneliness. Together they began to explore causes and options for dealing with this very human and challenging experience.

Loneliness

Loneliness is a complex experiential reality made up of more than one feeling. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, in *The Restless Heart* describes loneliness as an undifferentiated sensation that

speaks of alienation, exclusion, rejection, longing, discontent, restlessness, emptiness, frustration, dissatisfaction, incompleteness, insatiability, nostalgia and death. When certain life experiences occur, the death of a loved one, for example, it is easier to both identify and speak about one's loneliness. Most people understand that loneliness normally accompanies certain life events, such as the death of a loved one, the ending of a relationship, adolescence and aging. When a person expresses loneliness associated with these kinds of experiences, others often respond with empathy, which can lead to a deeper sense of being cared for and connected to others.

Unspeakable Loneliness

Other situations and experiences, such as those experienced by Fr. Jeff (e.g., feeling unattractive, being left out/not invited, one-sided relating) also lead to loneliness and are much harder to speak about. Rolheiser refers to this type of loneliness as **unspeakable loneliness**, a loneliness that cannot be shared because it is experienced in a private and humiliating way. The loneliness that arises from loss or death, can be spoken of because its "pain is greater than its shame." Other experiences of loneliness are unspeakable because speaking "may further damage an already fragile sense of self that has been made fragile, in part, by the loneliness itself."

What is it about Fr. Jeff and his current situation that seems to be leading him to such profound loneliness? The following factors seem to be contributing to his unspeakable loneliness:

- Being a public figure, he is surrounded by people who come to him for
- assistance and may not be aware of his transition and needs.
- His self-doubt and his desire to please and be of service may be
- contributing to a lack of balance.
- Transitions are always lonely times.
- His relationships are few and one-sided; he is the one to ask/invite.
- Fr. Jeff is experiencing rejection and betrayal from Fr. Steve; he is left out.
- He doubts his own attractiveness.
- He is spending more time on the Internet, possibly engaging in fantasy
- to live out on-line what he is not experiencing in his real life.

Fr. Jeff feels a profound sense of unspeakable loneliness and is left with "a wound, a humiliation, a sense of not measuring-up, an insecurity and a sense of shame" that is deepening because he cannot talk about it. Unspeakable loneliness is experienced where shame and insecurity seep in.

Dealing with Loneliness

With the help of some counseling, Fr. Jeff is beginning to name his experience and to take some steps to live in a healthier and more connected way.

One of the first things that Fr. Jeff is learning is that some of his experiences and feelings are quite normal for a person in transition, for a recently ordained priest. In addition, the experience of some loneliness is to be expected when one takes on a public role and is also negotiating new ways of relating in a new context.

Fr. Jeff is also learning the positive value of talking about his experience and his feelings. He is more aware that not speaking about what was happening in his life and his feelings was leading to depression and withdrawal from others, which in turn was leading to a deeper sense of shame and worthlessness. In addition, he is realizing how his increased use of the Internet was a less than satisfactory way of making the connections he so eagerly desires in his real life.

It is also clearer to Fr. Jeff that he needs to make his world bigger, especially his relational world. He is able to name that his relationship with Fr. Steve is not mutual and that he is tired of being in a one-sided relationship where he is doing all the work. He is also more realistic about how challenging it is to develop and maintain healthy relationships with other priests, many of whom are older and have well-established relationships. Forging some different relationships and doing some life-giving things by himself are priority considerations these days.

Finally, Fr. Jeff is praying his loneliness and is asking God to assist him in making good choices to be connected with himself and others.

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