

The Healing Power of the Body of Christ: An Ecclesial and Neurological Argument for Social Connection Despite Social Distancing

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THE CORONAVIRUS HAS SICKENED the human population not only through its contagious infections. Social distancing and mandatory quarantines certainly helped flatten the curve of positive cases and slow the spread of the virus. However, the effective tactics used to fight the global pandemic have also accelerated a slowly increasing trend of social disengagement and isolation especially in modern American culture. Distancing, social isolation, and individualistic pursuits, while beneficial for finding prayerful peace,¹ may also have detrimental consequences with severities comparable to viruses. Fracturing in human relationships, families, and communities leaves wounds of isolation that cause a decrease in life expectancies and an increase in existential longings for connection, meaning, and fulfillment.² When breakdowns of families and communities occur, feelings of loneliness can permeate into a person's consciousness and way of living.³ Research shows that the

¹ See Matthew 6:6 (NAB): "When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you." See also "The Cell," in Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, *Tools Matter for Practicing the Spiritual Life* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 70–77; Chester L. Tolson and Harold G. Koenig, *The Healing Power of Prayer: The Surprising Connection between Prayer and Your Health* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 111–120; Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).

² See Matthew D. Lieberman and Naomi I. Eisenberger, "A Pain by Any Other Name (Rejection, Exclusion, Ostracism) Still Hurts the Same: The Role of Dorsal Anterior Cingulate Cortex in Social and Physical Pain," in *Social Neuroscience: People Thinking about Thinking People*, ed. John T. Cacioppo, Penny S. Visser, and Cynthia L. Pickett (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006), 167–187; Teresa E. Seeman, Tina M. Lusignolo, Marilyn Albert, and Lisa Berkman, "Social Relationships, Social Support, and Patterns of Cognitive Aging in Healthy, High-Functioning Older Adults: MacArthur Studies of Successful Aging," *Health Psychology* 20, no. 4 (2001): 243–255.

³ There is a growing field of research delving into the silent epidemic of loneliness. See John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Lissa Rankin, *Mind Over Medicine: Scientific Proof You Can Heal Yourself* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2013),

effects of loneliness have possible links to depression, inactivity, proclivity to smoking and risk-taking behavior, higher rates of coronary heart disease and stroke, low self-esteem, sleep disorders, dysregulated stress response, cognitive decline, and increased chances of developing Alzheimer's disease.⁴ While social distancing and quarantined separation certainly prevent the passage of microscopic virus strains from the nasal cavity of one person to that of another, physical and psychological distancing propagate deep-seated loneliness and a cascade of physical, psychological, neurological, and spiritual disorders.

A healing remedy for the disorders of separation is what I will term a *supra-ecclesial community*. When Christians gather in communities of prayer and participate in liturgy, they are inspired to grow in knowledge of and devotion to the Trinitarian God of love as well as to develop a collective consciousness of a unified body rather than holding on to individualistic perspectives.⁵ The work of the twentieth-century Dominican theologian Yves Congar develops a vision of the Church portraying human persons flourishing as parts of a diverse yet unified catholic community. He emphasizes the benefits of participating in the one communal body of the Church. When people enact their God-given charisms, they strengthen loving human relationships and conform their lives to the will of God. Congar's vast and influential writings can provide a vision for the healing power of the living and unified Body of Christ.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section describes the detrimental consequences of isolation and the spiritual perils of social distancing and human separation. The second section

65–119; Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, and J. Bradley Layton, "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review," *PLoS Medicine* 7, no. 7 (2010): 1–20; Susan Pinker, *The Village Effect: How Face-to-Face Contact Can Make Us Healthier, Happier, and Smarter* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2014).

⁴ See Apama Shankar, Anne McMunn, James Banks, and Andrew Steptoe, "Loneliness, Social Isolation, and Behavioral and Biological Health Indicators in Older Adults," *Health Psychology* 30, no. 4 (2011): 377–385; Nicole K. Valtorta, Mona Kanaan, Simon Gilbody, Sara Ronzi, and Barbara Hanratty, "Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Coronary Heart Disease and Stroke: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Observational Studies," *Heart* 102, no. 13 (2016): 1009–1016; Andrew Steptoe, Natalie Owen, Sabine R. Kunz-Ebrecht, and Lena Brydon, "Loneliness and Neuroendocrine, Cardiovascular, and Inflammatory Stress Responses in Middle-aged Men and Women," *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 29, no. 5 (2004): 593–611; John T. Cacioppo and L. C. Hawkley, "Perceived Social Isolation and Cognition," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 13, no. 10 (2009): 447–454; L. C. Hawkley and John T. Cacioppo, "Loneliness Matters: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Consequences and Mechanisms," *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 40, no. 2 (2010): 218–227.

⁵ See Tyler J. VanderWeele, "Religious Communities and Human Flourishing," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 5 (2017): 476–481.

develops Congar's theological insights into how community, especially through the sacramental activity of the Church and the grace of the Holy Spirit, allows for participation in the life of the Trinitarian God. The third section applies Congar's theological principles to practical pastoral healing remedies for the tendencies of division within the present age, especially dealing with the global pandemic. Neuroscientific studies are pointing toward the importance of social connections. Congar's ecclesiological wisdom offers a healing contrast to the isolation and alienation of our time by articulating a vision of the human person as part of the Body of Christ. People who seek prayerful solitude form loving relationships, unite in communal worship of God, and love their neighbors, support and depend upon each other as members of a *supra-ecclesial* community that can exist here on earth as in heaven.

THE SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION OF HUMANITY

The flourishing of human life requires loving relationships and strong communities while social isolation and divided societies are lethal. Money, fame, and honors are often identified as the marks of a successful life in society. However, many psychological, sociological, and neurological studies reveal that social connection is far more important than material wealth.⁶ The obsession for wealth and honor can drive people to despair or fuel desperate measures. Aaron Kheriaty's research on suicide found that "rising rates of suicide, drug abuse, and depression can all be traced to increased social fragmentation. Since the 1980s, reported loneliness among adults in the US increased from 20% to 40%."⁷ Supporting the sad reality of Kheriaty's insight about social fragmentation, the World Health Organization announced that "depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, and is a major contributor to the overall global burden of disease."⁸ Several other studies link depression and loneliness by showing how "depression is considered a possible pathway through which loneliness and isolation affect health. Indeed, depressed individuals are more likely to report poorer health-related

⁶ See George E. Vaillant, "Natural History of Male Psychological Health—Effects of Mental Health on Physical Health," *New England Journal of Medicine* 301, no. 23 (1979): 1249–1254; Johanna C. Malone, Shiri Cohen, Sabrina R. Liu, George E. Vaillant, and Robert J. Waldinger, "Adaptive Midlife Defense Mechanisms and Late-Life Health," *Personality and Individual Differences* 55, no. 2 (2013): 85–89; Ye Luo, Louise C. Hawkey, Linda J. Waite, and John T. Cacioppo, "Loneliness, Health, and Mortality in Old Age: A National Longitudinal Study," *Social Science and Medicine* 74, no. 6 (2012): 907–914.

⁷ Aaron Kheriaty, "Dying of Despair," *First Things* 275 (August 2017): 22.

⁸ World Health Organization, January 30, 2020, www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression.

behavior.”⁹ Dr. Lissa Rankin has confirmed and developed the connection between depression, loneliness, and their deadly side effects with her research, identifying loneliness as the number one health crisis in the modern world.¹⁰

There are numerous causes of loneliness. As the recent pandemic swept through the world’s population, cities locked-down, people quarantined, isolation, and social separation were the mandated normal, and people sank into loneliness. A recent American Psychological Association report identified “a perfect storm” of intense stressors pounding societies, families, and individuals while separation ensued. The report explained how “millions of people have lost their jobs; some have lost their homes or businesses. Families cooped up together because of stay-at-home orders are chafing under the stress, which may increase the risk of intimate partner violence and child abuse.”¹¹ Disrupted routines and the threat of contracting a life-threatening disease exacerbated pre-existing problems such as mental illness or substance abuse. Physical distancing endangered mental health even as it protected physical health. The viral pandemic triggered the spread of mental and spiritual pandemics.

Technological communication often seems to remedy the combination of stress factors arising from the effects of the pandemic, and it allows business and education to continue by keeping people virtually connected. However, psychological and sociological studies have been showing for decades that social relationships and conversations through technology lack necessary components of meaningful relationships. In 1997, Robert Kraut and his colleagues were granted money from Apple Computers, AT&T, Bell Atlantic, Intel, and several other major tech companies to run an experiment testing the effects of Internet use. They found, paradoxically, that “greater use of the Internet was associated with small but statistically significant declines in social involvement as measured by communication within the family and the size of people’s local social networks, and with increases in loneliness, a psychological state associated with social involvement. Greater use of the Internet was

⁹ Shankar, McMunn, Banks, and Steptoe, “Loneliness, Social Isolation, and Behavioral and Biological Health Indicators in Older Adults,” 378. See also Annette Allgöwer, Jane Wardle, and Andrew Steptoe, “Depressive Symptoms, Social Support, and Personal Health Behaviors in Young Men and Women,” *Health Psychology* 20, no. 3 (2001): 223–227.

¹⁰ Lissa Rankin, “The #1 Public Health Issue Doctors Aren’t Talking About,” YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2hLhWS1O10.

¹¹ Rebecca A. Clay, “COVID-19 and Suicide,” *Monitor on Psychology* 51, no. 4 (2020), www.apa.org/monitor/2020/06/covid-suicide.

also associated with increases in depression.”¹² Already in 1997, they speculated that Internet use triggered disengagement from the activities of communal life. People had become overwhelmed with information rather than communicating with others. People spent more time with weak online relationships rather than with strong, long-lasting friendships or family members.¹³ How much more now is the rise of technology causing physical separation between people as well as psychological anxiety and spiritual longing?

As much as Zoom parties, synchronized Netflix viewings, e-sport games, and video-chat dance parties are used as coping mechanisms to calm the interior angst of quarantine-induced loneliness, the use of technological communication lacks physical presence and manipulates communal connections. Susan Pinker writes in her analysis of technology that by “assigning our devices supernatural powers, many of us assume we can create distance when we want it and closeness when we want it. ... [A]part is actually the new together, because alone isn’t alone anymore.”¹⁴ Pinker is certainly not a luddite but strongly questions the use of technology. For example, she writes about how millions of dollars are spent by public school systems to enhance the tablet program, while skilled teachers are let go and the value of personal relationships and face-to-face interaction is lost.

Technology-induced social isolation and loneliness are not new issues rising from the present pandemic. Robert Putnam’s research in the 1990s acknowledged the sociological trends of social separation starting in the 1950s as technology infiltrated homes and transformed lifestyles toward the privatization of leisure time. People disengaged from communal interaction and social development. In reflecting on this sociological phenomenon, Putnam states: “By virtually every

¹² Robert Kraut, Michael Patterson, Vicki Lundmark, Sara Kiesler, Tridas Mukophadhyay, and William Scherlis, “Internet Paradox: A Social Technology That Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-Being?,” *American Psychologist* 53, no. 9 (1998): 1028.

¹³ Gentiana Sadikaj and D. S. Moskowitz, “I Hear but I Don’t See You: Interacting Over Phone Reduces the Accuracy of Perceiving Affiliation in the Other,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 89 (2018): 141. See also Susan Holtzman, Drew DeClerck, Kara Turcotte, Diana Lisi, and Michael Woodworth, “Emotional Support During Times of Stress: Can Text Messaging Compete with In-Person Interactions?,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 71 (2017): 130–139.

¹⁴ Pinker, *The Village Effect*, 179. See also John O’Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 228: “In post-modern culture, we tend more and more to inhabit virtual reality rather than actual reality. More and more time is spent in the shadowlands of the computer world; this is a world which is all foreground but has no background. ... Much of modern life is lived in the territory of externality; if we succumb completely to the external, we will lose all sense of inner and personal presence. We will become the ultimate harvesters of absence, namely, ghosts in our lives.”

conceivable measure, social capital has eroded steadily and sometimes dramatically over the past two generations. The quantitative evidence is overwhelming. ... Americans have had a growing sense at some visceral level of disintegrating social bonds.”¹⁵ These tendencies prophesied by Putnam at the turn of the millennium are only increasing. Johann Hari’s research in *Lost Connections* summarizes and updates Putnam’s as he comments on the negative trends of social disengagement over the past seventy years. He writes: “The structures for looking out for each other—from the family to the neighborhood—fell apart. We disbanded our tribes. We embarked on an experiment—to see if humans can live alone.”¹⁶ The experiment is failing dramatically as Hari gives evidence of high rates of depression and correlated dependencies on drug use and abuse because of the effects of social separation. Hari links depression and drug abuse to disconnections from meaningful work, other people, values, holistic understandings of one’s childhood traumas, status and respect, the natural world, a hopeful and secure future, one’s genetic lineage, and proper attention to one’s homeostatic needs. Neural and physiological studies as well as anthropological trends are revealing how the “Self” is in turmoil.¹⁷ Social separation has disastrous effects on persons and communities.

The symptoms of loneliness are shown to have long-term consequences. John T. Cacioppo, a social neuroscientist at the University of Chicago, focused his research of over three decades on

¹⁵ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 287.

¹⁶ Johann Hari, *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression—and the Unexpected Solutions* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 80.

¹⁷ There is a growing discussion on the moral implications of the pervasiveness of social networks and digital devices in the lives of a majority of first world populations. To appreciate this discussion, see Marcus Mescher, “The Moral Impact of Digital Devices,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, no. 2 (2020): 65–93; Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (and What That Means for the Rest of Us)* (New York: Atria, 2017); Adam L. Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* (New York: Penguin, 2017); Rebecca A. Clay, “Treating the Misuse of Digital Devices: Psychologists are Spearheading Efforts to Help Wean People Off Technology,” *Monitor on Psychology* 49, no. 10 (2018): 76; Jonathan Haidt and Tobias Rose-Stockwell, “The Dark Psychology of Social Networks: Why it Feels Everything is Going Haywire,” *The Atlantic* (December 2019), www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/social-media-democracy/600763/; Tristan Harris, “Our Brains are no Match for Our Technology,” *The New York Times*, *Turning Points* (Dec. 5, 2019), www.nytimes.com/2019/12/05/opinion/digital-technology-brain.html. Tristan Harris is also the editor of the influential documentary the detrimental uses of technology on the human person called *The Social Dilemma*. Tristan Harris also is the founder of the Center for Humane Technology (www.humantech.com).

the increasing epidemic of loneliness pervading modern culture. Cacioppo, along with his colleagues Louise Hawkley and Gary Bertson, discovered five consistent symptoms of loneliness.¹⁸ First, a lonely person is evolutionarily less fit; because of poorer health and lower energy levels, the person is less attractive to potential partners for meaningful and reproductive relationships.¹⁹ Second, when health care providers are forced to make decisions about the allocation of resources to suffering patients, Cacioppo and his colleagues claim that seeing an isolated person with no social connections discourages them from using the limited resources on that person so as to reserve the resources for socially-connected people.²⁰ Third, isolated people are less inclined to pursue healthy lifestyle choices. They receive less encouragement to take care of themselves or seek out necessary health treatments compared to those surrounded by supportive friends and family. Fourth, lonely people are found to have consistently higher levels of stress compared to people with many social connections. The effects of stress, especially chronic stress (consistently activated sympathetic nervous system “fight or flight” and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical [HPA] response mechanism) deteriorates bodily organs, especially the heart, and lowers resiliency for overcoming future stress.²¹ Fifth, lonely people have a weakened ability to repair and maintain their physiology. “The restorative act of sleep,” Cacioppo and his colleagues find, “is more efficient and effective—that is, salubrious—in non-lonely individuals than in lonely individuals.”²² They explain, “The research on loneliness suggests that different mechanisms operate to explain short-term and long-term effects of loneliness on health and well-being. We have further found that slowly unfolding pathophysiological processes triggered by loneliness are the consequence of multiple physiological systems.”²³ Cacioppo’s research reveals that lonely individuals perpetuate the physical, psychological, and neurological effects of loneliness because of the isolated and disconnected perspective in which they are trapped.

Loneliness also has societal ramifications as the productivity of whole economies can decline. Those suffering from loneliness often lack the interest, motivation, or ability to go to work. When large numbers of a society’s population are suffering from loneliness, the

¹⁸ See John T. Cacioppo, Louise C. Hawkley, and Gary G. Bertson, “The Anatomy of Loneliness,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12, no. 3 (2003): 71–74.

¹⁹ Cacioppo, Hawkley, and Bertson, “The Anatomy of Loneliness,” 71.

²⁰ Cacioppo, Hawkley, and Bertson, “The Anatomy of Loneliness,” 71.

²¹ Cacioppo, Hawkley, and Bertson, “The Anatomy of Loneliness,” 72.

²² Cacioppo, Hawkley, and Bertson, “The Anatomy of Loneliness,” 73.

²³ Cacioppo, Hawkley, and Bertson, “The Anatomy of Loneliness,” 74.

impact is magnified. A study done by Ozcelik and Barsade gives evidence that loneliness is a social phenomenon observable by an employee's coworkers and diminishing work performance.²⁴ The ripple effects of loneliness throughout a population account for the fact that the government of the United Kingdom has recently designated over twenty-million pounds toward the development of the Loneliness Commission and created a position in the national government called the Minister of Loneliness under the Secretary of State for Sport and Civil Society. The founding document of this commission states: "Government's vision is for this country to be a place where we can all have strong social relationships. Where families, friends and communities support each other, especially at vulnerable points where people are at greater risk of loneliness. Where institutions value the human element in their interactions with people. And where loneliness is recognized and acted on without stigma or shame, so that we all look out for one another."²⁵ The crippling effects of lonely individuals in society are gaining recognition as a major world crisis.

The feelings associated with loneliness include emptiness, anxiety, hunger for intimacy, fear, and self-loathing. These desperate feelings amplify the need for either healing remedies for relief or numbing antidotes for escape. The opioid crisis and other addictive behaviors are often linked to the deep anguish plaguing human souls.²⁶ Despite all of the studies on the causes and effects of loneliness and, subsequently, the millions of dollars now allocated to treatments for this pervading epidemic ravaging through populations and affecting the economic development of countries, what is the root cause of this affliction? Why are people falling into depression which then cascades into disconnection and withdrawal from social connections? Why do people not feel comfortable reaching out to one another for support when dealing with pain, stress, fear, and sadness? What kind of existential longing is causing people to turn to drugs, alcohol, the Internet, or other addictive mind-numbing activities to fulfill their

²⁴ See Hakan Ozcelik and Sigal Barsade, "Work Loneliness and Employee Performance," *Academy of Management Proceedings* 2011, no. 1 (2017): 1–6.

²⁵ Jeremy Wright and Tracey Crouch, eds., *A Connected Society: A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness—Laying the Foundations for Change* (London: Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2018), 6.

²⁶ See Hari, *Lost Connections*, 27–38; Katie O'Connor, "Drug Overdoses Surge Due to Pandemic, Early Reports Show," *Psychiatric News* 55, no. 15 (30 July 2020): 9; William Wan and Heather Long, "'Cries for Help': Drug Overdoses Are Soaring During the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Washington Post*, July 1, 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/07/01/coronavirus-drug-overdose/: "Social distancing has also sequestered people, leaving them to take drugs alone and making it less likely that someone else will be there to call 911 or to administer the lifesaving overdose antidote naloxone, also known as Narcan."

aching hearts?

To be human requires connection, an integration with a self-transcendent mission more expansive than individual pursuits. What holds healthy communities together is a worldview allowing the members of the community to endure and make sense of the world in which they live. Philip Brownell, in his chapter “Healing Potential of Religious Community,” explains: “A worldview is comprised of the cognitive beliefs and cultural feelings and values that mediate between knowledge systems within a given people group. People learn worldviews from their communities, and each community re-creates itself (and its worldview), often changing in the process through social interaction. It is the metaphors and stories in that process that provide a framework by which people make sense of their lives.”²⁷ More than simply a collection of individuals, who may still experience loneliness even when around each other, a life-giving community will facilitate interpersonal experience as each member becomes conscious of his or her part within a unified body. Each person will have distinct and important roles to contribute to the well-being of the whole. Brownell explains: “When people are drawn into relationships through their interest in one another, the spiritual response to needs, and the depth of sanctification, gifts are set loose in the community, resulting in the observation that Paul made that there are varieties of gifts, varieties of ministries, and varieties of effects (when all this works together in a community).”²⁸ Religious communities, as manifest in local churches, can often become the needed refuge of connection in a fractured world.

At the same time, religious affiliation and the engagement in religious practices, including prayer, communal worship, solitary reflection, and communal service projects are not merely self-help applications. The authentic practice of a faith tradition establishes a solid foundation to one’s life by providing meaning and purpose while also connecting people to each other as a unified community.²⁹ To fulfill the longing of the human heart requires a connection to a

²⁷ Philip Brownell, “Healing Potential of Religious Community,” in *The Healing Power of Spirituality: How Faith Helps Humans Thrive*, Vol. 2, Religion, ed. J. Harold Ellens (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 2.

²⁸ Brownell, “Healing Potential of Religious Community,” 16.

²⁹ As an example of a study that investigated the relationship between religious affiliation and practice with suicide attempts see Kanita Dervic, Maria A. Oquendo, Michael F. Grunebaum, Steve Ellis, Ainsley K. Burke, and J. John Mann, “Religious Affiliation and Suicide Attempt,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 161, no. 12 (2004): 2303–2308: “Religiously unaffiliated subjects had significantly more lifetime suicide attempts and more first degree relatives who committed suicide than subjects who endorsed a religious affiliation. Unaffiliated subjects were younger, less often married, less often had children, and had less contact with family members.”

community that holds a unified vision of ultimate fulfillment for all persons together, a *supra-ecclesial community*. From a theological perspective, the deepest human desire is communal unification in fulfillment with the creator God, who is love.³⁰ The writings of Yves Congar develop a vision of a *supra-ecclesial community*. His work addresses the fundamental Christian belief of the Trinitarian God, who is perfect unity with diversity. He also discusses God's action within the Church in the modern world through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (see also *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 1–8).³¹ Human persons are essential components of God's diversity and unity in that each person is a unique, sacred sanctuary of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit labors within creation to enliven people as citizens of the Kingdom of God. As a contrast to the coping mechanisms presently used for the aches of loneliness as outlined above, by entering the life of the Church—which includes the discipline of prayer, the worship of God, and the active life of evangelization and care for the poor, sick, or vulnerable—people long for connection with each other and God, “the partner who is at the one and the same time infinitely beyond and more intimate than our deepest self.”³² Congar's writings delve into the mystery of God's active presence in the world through the Church and that is why they are an invaluable resource to use to think theologically about the challenge of loneliness and offer a possible answer to it.

The solution to the detrimental problems of isolation and the breakdown of community will require each person's unique perspectives and individual concerted efforts, guided by divine grace, to form and maintain a communal gathering place, like the Church. As Pinker explains in *The Village Effect*, “Social contact is like a vaccine: a little can go a long way when it comes to preventing pain and loss of opportunity, while saving billions in health and social service costs.”³³ Christianity proclaims that, in the midst of the vast diversity of humanity, there is one way, one truth, one life, who is the second person of the Trinity (John 14:6). The way of the life of loving and meaningful connection, as personified by Jesus Christ, is revealed to humanity through grace. God's grace precedes any human effort and impels people toward the loving unity of the Trinitarian God. As

³⁰ See the theological research of Robert M. Doran in the three volumes of *The Trinity in History: Theology of the Divine Missions*. Doran emphasizes how the human person is drawn into the interpersonal relationship with the Trinitarian Relations of love.

³¹ See Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 65–70.

³² Yves Congar, “The Spirit Is the Source of Life in Us Personally and in the Church,” in *The Spirit of God: Short Writings on the Holy Spirit*, ed. and trans. Susan Mader Brown, Mark E. Ginter, Joseph G. Mueller, and Catherine E. Clifford (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 39.

³³ Pinker, *The Village Effect*, 275.

people of faith are driven by grace and love to gather together to worship the one God of love, they form a unified body, the Church (*Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 39–40). The gathering of people united by grace and impelled by love can then become a refuge for the lonely and despairing. Pope Francis commented that the Church is a field hospital having “the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful.”³⁴ If the Church can become a healing sanctuary for the fractured society and lonely individuals, the sinful separation from God and one another is minimized. Individuals who have a sense of belonging can heal the brokenness within and restore relationships. The unification as the Body of Christ in an ecclesial community provides glimpses of divine life, which is why the Church is more than a therapeutic mechanism. On the contrary, when persons are flooded with God’s grace they become instruments of God’s love by their compassionate acts of care for the wounded and despairing.

THE FULLNESS OF LIFE IN AND AS THE CHURCH

This second section discusses Congar’s writings that emphasize the communal nature of humanity. Much of Congar’s scholarship revolves around historical divisions of the Church, from the rift between the Eastern Orthodox and the Western Roman Church, to the Reformation’s divisions. Congar’s work addresses how diversity and differences of religious expression can coexist along with unity in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Congar’s strategies for building stronger unity as a human community are foundational, wide-ranging, and methodological, extending their applicability to other human divisions, especially the recent issues of loneliness, individualism, and community disintegration, as discussed. Congar’s wisdom from the mid-twentieth century remains relevant for issues of the twenty-first century because it is rooted in the conviction that the Holy Spirit radically transforms human life. He writes: “The Holy Spirit is that active presence in us of the Absolute who, at one and the same time, deepens our interior life by making it vibrant and welcoming and puts us in communion with others: the Spirit is what requires and is the means of communion.”³⁵ In this second section I highlight three aspects of Congar’s work: first, the process required to deepen one’s interior life; second, the unifying force of the life of the Church; and third, the eschatological implications of the Body of Christ.

³⁴ Antonio Spadaro, SJ, “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *America*, September 30, 2013, www.americanmagazine.org/pope-interview.

³⁵ Congar, *The Spirit of God*, 38.

The Grace and Power of Sacred Solitude

According to Congar, human persons are freed from their existential angst and fundamental brokenness by developing an interior life of prayer. In a short writing entitled “The Spirit Is the Source of Life in Us Personally and in the Church,” he emphasizes humanity’s hunger for the Holy Spirit. He explains: “This thirst for the Trinity and the Holy Spirit coincides with—and this is no accident—an agonizing search for identity on the part of humanity.”³⁶ After this, Congar references W. H. Auden’s *Christmas Oratorio*. This contemplation considers the motivation of the three magi for following the star. Congar retells the story of the magi through Auden’s creative interpretation. To the question addressed to the three magi of why they are following the star, “The first says ‘to discover how to be truthful today,’ the second one says ‘to discover how to be alive today,’ the third says, ‘to discover how to love today.’ Then all say together: ‘To discover how to be human today is why we follow the star!’”³⁷ Humans seek to discover the originating font of their nature enabling flourishing and fulfillment. Loneliness and the propensity for addictive behaviors are the consequences of persons thirsting for fulfillment but grasping for the unsatisfying, that which does not reveal the essence of human life, that which is not God.

Instead of seeing quarantine and isolation as a mandated punishment, can the quiet solitude take on a sanctity? Congar advocates for disciplined prayer practice to develop an interior disposition of freedom and a vision of the unifying love of God. Strong communities are the result of individuals prayerfully freed from selfish or isolating attachments and actions. Congar explains: “Interiority bespeaks liberty. ... The Spirit does not liberate from the content of the Law, that is, from the good, but it removes the constraint of obligations because, by grace and love, the Spirit interiorizes what they command. Henceforth my conformity to the Law comes from me; it is my spontaneous movement. I act freely.”³⁸ Receiving the grace of freedom requires discipline, asceticism, and vulnerable receptivity. Grace establishes trust in God’s freeing law of love and removes disordered attachments to the finite aspects of the physical world. Growth toward freedom is an interior journey toward love, as the magi’s voyage was guided by the star, symbolic of their steadfast faith. The Holy Spirit leads people along the path of holiness and truth, which is manifested as communion with God and love of neighbors. Congar asserts: “Immersed in a world of concrete, of technology, of programmed life, and of merciless competition, a person today

³⁶ Congar, *The Spirit of God*, 37.

³⁷ Congar, *The Spirit of God*, 37.

³⁸ Congar, *The Spirit of God*, 41.

experiences the need to have an interior life ('un dedans'), some sacred personal space and, at the same time, a connection with other human beings."³⁹ Interior life develops in solitude.⁴⁰ It necessitates renouncing aspects of the present society contributing to loneliness so as to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit provides the desire for community and connection. The irony of the interior life is that when persons open themselves to receive the flood of God's love (Romans 5:5) through prayerful solitude, they are impelled to love fellow human persons (John 13:34–35) in community.

Congar explains that the law of freedom requires growth at two levels, personal and communal. He wrote: "Conversion is personal, but it is not sufficient. The content of the Law, which Love makes concrete (Romans 13:8–12), has to do with one's neighbor."⁴¹ In saying this, a clear distinction exists between loneliness and solitude. Prayerful solitude allows for conversion from despair to hope, wickedness to virtue, ignorance to knowledge.⁴² When a person intentionally prays by contemplating God's self-emptying love, she is motivated to transcend personal struggles to join a community and contribute to the flourishing of others.⁴³ Loneliness, as discussed, causes mental and physical afflictions. Congar articulates how the benefits of the grace of liberty can radiate from the peace of interior life out to the activities of life and the physical body.⁴⁴ He writes: "The

³⁹ Congar, *The Spirit of God*, 38.

⁴⁰ See Robert Cardinal Sarah with Nicolas Diat, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2017), 23: "It is necessary to leave our interior turmoil in order to find God. Despite the agitations, the busyness, the easy pleasures, God remains silently present. He is in us like a thought, a word, and a presence whose secret sources are buried in God himself, inaccessible to human inspection. Solitude is the best state in which to hear God's silence."

⁴¹ Congar, *The Spirit of God*, 42.

⁴² Bernard Lonergan, SJ, another twentieth-century Catholic theologian, discussed the religious, moral, and intellectual conversions of self-appropriation. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Collected Works, vol. 14, 2nd edition, revised and augmented (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 238–247.

⁴³ Bernard Lonergan explained how conversion leads to self-transcendence: "As intellectual and moral conversion, so also religious conversion is a modality of self-transcendence. Moral conversion is to values apprehended, affirmed, and realized by a real self-transcendence. Religious conversion is to a total being-in-love as the efficacious ground of all self-transcendence, whether in the pursuit of truth, or in the realization of human values, or in the orientation man adopts to the universe, its ground, and its goal" (Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 241).

⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, the Jewish German refugee who sought refuge in the United States, compared and contrasted the *vita activa*, involved in the dealings of the *polis*, with the *vita contemplativa*. See Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind; The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, one-volume edition (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 27: "Before the modern age, there had existed—not many but a few—well trodden escape routes, at least for philosophers. In antiquity, there was the *bios theōrētikos*: the

liberty that the Spirit brings goes beyond the purely private spiritual realm of the personal interior life. This is so, first of all, because liberty is intended for our body too.”⁴⁵ As loneliness has many physical manifestations and causes harmful effects to the body, the peace and liberty of divine grace has physical manifestations and allows for healing and flourishing.⁴⁶ Congar writes: “Through our bodies, we are a piece of the world. We may be a very small piece in terms of mass but we are a decisive one because the world’s evolution has culminated in us and, thus, we draw the world into our own destiny.”⁴⁷ Solitude allows a person to recognize the importance and blessing of his or her existence and the talents and strengths he or she has to contribute to the benefit of humanity.

Time in prayerful solitude impels a person toward the love of community. Jesus sought out deserts and mountains for aloneness in prayer and communion with his Father. The time of solitude with God the Father empowered Jesus to immerse himself in the life of the community and form his disciples (Matthew 14:22–23; Luke 6:12). Following times of prayerful solitude, Jesus returned to the cities and called forth his disciples to form a community of zealous faithful proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God. He also sought out and healed the sick and exorcized demons. Prayer in holy solitude can empower each person to fulfill his or her mission within the human community. Congar discusses how the Holy Spirit imparts “charisms” to each member of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. He explains that “charism” means gift or talent and “does not necessarily mean extraordinary gifts such as miracles, healings, or speaking in tongues. These gifts have been present in the past and still exist. ... [they are] the plan of God’s grace.”⁴⁸ Too often, lonely people shamefully think that they have nothing to contribute to the

thinker dwelt in the neighborhood of things necessary and everlasting, partaking in their Being to the extent that this is possible for mortals. In the era of Christian philosophy, there was the *vita contemplativa* of the monasteries and the universities, but also the consoling thought of divine Providence, joined to the expectation of an after-life when what had seemed contingent and meaningless in this world would become crystal clear.”

⁴⁵ Congar, *The Spirit of God*, 42.

⁴⁶ The author of this article is currently a member of a team working on a grant-funded research project entitled “The Marquette Irenaeus Project.” The research team is studying the transformational effects of Christian prayer practices by identifying biomarkers of healing and self-regulation, qualitative psychological patterns of spiritual growth, and maturation of one’s image of God. The project hopes to revive and teach ancient Christian prayer practices and virtuous habits that foster resiliency, community, human flourishing, and movement toward the fullness of life (www.marquette.edu/innovation/documents/ec-19-krall.pdf).

⁴⁷ Congar, *The Spirit of God*, 43.

⁴⁸ Congar, *The Spirit of God*, 49–50.

community and that they cannot perform helpful deeds for others. Because of self-doubt, they are swept into the depression of dejection.⁴⁹ In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul explained how each person is given charisms that build up the full stature of Christ. When each person contributes to the formation of the community of the Church by developing and using their charisms, St. Paul taught, “We may no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from their cunning in the interests of deceitful scheming. Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ” (Ephesians 4:14–15). Prayerful solitude provides space for the Spirit to work within a person and stir up the charisms residing in the person’s heart and mind.

Prayer includes acts of penance, contemplation and meditation, intentional awareness of one’s words, thoughts, and actions, fasting, and praise and worship of God. Christianity taught a variety of prayer methods for the last two millennia. Congar describes: “The deep dimension of our being becomes real in prayer, that admirable activity that is proper to the human being and qualifies one as human. We can experience an I-Thou relationship not only horizontally, with a human partner, but also vertically, with that partner who is at one and the same time infinitely beyond and more intimate than our deepest self.”⁵⁰ The act of prayer is very personal. As Jesus taught his disciples, “When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (Matthew 6:6). Christianity’s sacred traditions advocate for the importance of developing the interior, personal, individual life of the soul. When the soul is cultivated, trained, and nurtured, Congar explains that each person becomes like a finely tuned instrument in the orchestra of the living Church. He writes: “The Spirit is inciting revivals of the Gospel everywhere. This happens through persons. Consequently, this involves a certain precariousness, a fragmentary character, even an appearance of disorganization. But, as it is the same Spirit in all, both in Jesus and in us, a hidden but sovereign orchestra conductor will make the diversity converge in a unified work which is all his own!”⁵¹ Consisting of living persons, the Church is united through the active presence of the Holy Spirit who encourages the

⁴⁹ See Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of Spiritual Life* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 89: “The dejected one shows signs of being rough, through displays of rancor and impatience. Each day the dejected monk grows more hard-hearted toward others who need care and compassion. He displays useless grief and is caught in suicidal despair. This unwholesome sorrow draws out the energy from him and breaks down the one on whom it has fastened.”

⁵⁰ Congar, *The Spirit of God*, 39.

⁵¹ Congar, *The Spirit of God*, 50.

mutual sharing of personal gifts. This integration of charisms possessed within the great diversity of human persons is the building of the one, holy, Catholic Church, the living Mystical Body of Christ.

Involvement in the building of the Mystical Body of Christ requires the theological virtue of faith. For Congar, faith is linked closely to the communally cherished lineage of tradition. Faith and tradition together allow for personal interior spiritual growth so that the community as a whole can grow stronger. He writes: “[Faith] is a conviction to which we commit ourselves, but its content is not given us by ourselves. It is a sharing with a number of others and, in a line of historical succession, with Christ’s apostles. That is why it is shared out and transmitted beginning with them. Möhler expresses this well: ‘Without tradition there would be no Christian doctrine, no Church, only isolated Christians; no community, only individuals; no certitude, only doubt and opinion.’”⁵² The living reality of faith, that deep interior conviction arrived at only through profound personal prayer, is rooted and grounded in the living out and passing on of tradition, which connects all people and generations to one common vision.

Through tradition, the individual becomes connected to the body of the Church but does not lose individuality. With the notion of consciousness, Congar explains his point by writing: “Consciousness belongs to persons, who cannot merge into a higher unity. The unity of persons in the Church is not a ‘fusion,’ but a ‘communion’: a large number of persons possess in common the same realities ... as the content of their inner life, their memory, and thus of their consciousness. Thus, they are conscious not of their *personal* opinions but of the teachings of the Church that derives from the apostles.”⁵³ People of faith become conscious of their interdependence with each other and God. The “supra” consciousness of Christians emerges as each individual is able to rise above particular differences and recognize the shared unity activated when loving and praising God together. In the Church, the “supra” consciousness *is* love and is expressed when individuals conform their wills to God’s. Christians who conform their wills to God satisfy the longing of their hearts. Communion with each other in God is the means by which the disabling effects of loneliness are potentially overcome. As people cultivate their interior lives through prayer in solitude, refine their unique charisms, and participate in the great symphony of the proclamation of the Gospel, they can recognize the interconnection of a *supra-ecclesial community*. Christianity emphasizes the importance

⁵² Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (London: Burns and Oates, 1966), 315.

⁵³ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 320.

of each individual encountering the Lord in the quiet of his or her own heart. The fulfillment of this personal process of struggle and growth is the unification of one's self to God, which includes loving and communing with other people. Joining together with a shared consciousness strengthens the whole community. No longer are individuals "the aggregate of a number of particular voices but a summing up achieved by a sharing of consciousness, in which the memory of the gifts made by the Lord to his Bride is personified."⁵⁴ The human-divine communion is manifested in this world most powerfully in the life of the Church.

The Unifying Grace of the Life of the Church

Congar's writings explore the life of the Church as one body composed of many parts. The gathering and unifying of the diversity of peoples under one common belief and engaged in one shared mission is precisely what allows the collective whole to grow stronger. The individual person is who Congar held up as the great wealth of the Church. He explained how "each one is an original and autonomous principle of sensitivity, experience, relationships, and initiatives."⁵⁵ However, humanity's tendency toward sin means that the strength of the Church comes not from individual persons, but the power of God's grace that draws individuals together by wiping away division and discord. Congar explains that "the church here below is like a net full of fishes of all sorts, good and bad, like a field where weeds are mixed with wheat; both Cain and Abel can belong to it. The church's proper work is precisely to ceaselessly purify sinners from their sin."⁵⁶ As people gather as the living Church and form the supra-collective consciousness by putting aside individual opinions and selfish desires, then the Church can become, as Congar articulates, "the place and the instrument for the application of Christ's redemption."⁵⁷ Christ's redeeming act is the unification of all people, saints and sinners, drawn together as a whole and complete body acting as one to praise God.

Despite the weakness and sinfulness of humanity, the Holy Spirit draws out the best of each person receptive to God's grace. The power of grace enhances each part of the total body to strengthen the Catholic whole. Congar recognizes the dynamic universality in the great diversity of peoples coming together to praise God as the one, holy, Catholic Church. He explains: "The whole Church—its people, its

⁵⁴ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 321.

⁵⁵ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 2 (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 16.

⁵⁶ Yves Congar, *True and False Reform of the Church*, trans. Paul J. Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 99.

⁵⁷ Congar, *True and False Reform*, 99.

ministers, its treasure of the means of grace and its institution—is that sacrament of salvation. ... The Church is, after all, an institution of a very special kind. It acts in the present on the basis of past events and in the prospect of a future which is nothing less than the kingdom of God.”⁵⁸ The charisms and values that the Church holds as sacred and which are fulfilled in Christ, are manifested through the concrete actions of each person in his or her particular time and place. Each person is integral to the life of the Church.⁵⁹ Each person has a unique role to fulfill. As people allow the Holy Spirit into their lives to magnify their actions with grace, the fullness of the diversity and catholicity or universality of God is made manifest.

Liturgy is the clearest and most dynamic demonstration of the life of the Body of Christ. Congar explains: “It was in the liturgy that believing Christians professed their faith as a community in words and gestures and the grace that God had given to men in the economy of revelation and above all in Jesus Christ and his Passover was made present in the lives of men.”⁶⁰ The Church alive through the liturgy brings about the powerful movement of God towards humanity and humanity towards God. “This movement passes from the Father through the Son in the Spirit and returns in the Spirit through the Son to the glory of the Father, who takes us, as his children, into communion with him.”⁶¹ When people can experience it, communion is what satisfies the deepest longing of the human soul and what soothes the pain of loneliness and fear. When each person, blessed with unique, individualized charisms, contributes his or her loving presence in the orchestra of the Church, as manifested most poignantly in the liturgy, there is divine communion.

The Church can bring healing to the brokenness and loneliness of humanity through her sacraments and liturgies. Congar explains that the Church’s “whole ministry consists, whether in the celebration of the Eucharist or in exercising functions that spring therefrom and are preparatory to it, in applying to each soul, across the centuries, the universal cause of salvation and of life found and given by Christ in His Passion.”⁶² Congar’s vision of the Church is that of an institution which conveys divine grace. The Church is “the sacrament, the effective sign and giver of the gift of new life and of union of men

⁵⁸ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 3 (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 271.

⁵⁹ Henri De Lubac, another twentieth century Catholic theologian, also emphasized the importance of the person as integral to the life of the whole Church. See Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sr. Elizabeth Englund, OCD (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1950), 326–350.

⁶⁰ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 1, 104.

⁶¹ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 1, 104.

⁶² Yves Congar, *The Mystery of the Church*, trans. A. V. Littledale (Baltimore: Helicon, 1960), 115.

[sic] in Christ their Saviour.”⁶³ By conveying grace, however, the Church is not just another attempt to address depression, loneliness, and suicide crises that plague the human race. It does not offer another therapeutic technique to help remedy the symptoms of the pains of humanity. Becoming an active member of the Church is motivated by more than obtaining physical health benefits. Rather, the Church is the refuge for lonely, weak, and isolated sinners which then vivifies humanity by joining persons together as one Body, the foretaste of the Kingdom of God.⁶⁴ With pastoral care, Congar explains how Christ asks us “to open our souls to him, to deliver our lives up to him and to put ourselves entirely at his disposition, so that we no longer live our own life on our own account exclusively but that, by his grace, we live his own life and on his account.”⁶⁵ Rather than seeking individualistic gains, personal health benefits, and self-promoting pursuits, the ironic message of Christianity is that the more each person adheres to the will of Christ, the more free and fulfilled the person will be (James 1:25). The life of the Church, and thus the healing and enlivening of the Church’s members, consists of each person glorifying the Lord by contributing to the building of the Body of Christ.

The Church Drawn by the Holy Spirit to Fulfillment

The third aspect of Congar’s thought acknowledges the eschatological dimension of the unified Church. The Catholic Church, as manifest in the life of local parish congregations scattered throughout the world, may appear as a feeble, sinful, political, and human institution. Due to the global pandemic, many churches halted public masses for several months. The universal Church became privatized. The living pulse of the Church as manifested through communal liturgy continued but was spread out to virtual communities. Participation in the celebration of the Mass was performed by watching it on a personal computer alone, in quarantine, at home.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Christianity proclaims the eschatological vision of all creation uniting in a new heaven and a new earth. Keeping hold of this ultimate vision is a source of strength and hope for humanity caught in the trials of a pandemic-riddled and divisive world. Loneliness or quarantine cannot crush a person who perseveres in eschatological hope. Jesus proclaimed the fulfillment of the

⁶³ Congar, *The Mystery of the Church*, 115.

⁶⁴ See Yves Congar, *The Mystery of the Church*, 120.

⁶⁵ Congar, *The Mystery of the Church*, 119.

⁶⁶ For a balanced reflection about the needed careful discernment between the public performance of liturgies in the midst of a global pandemic and the preservation of all human life through quarantine, see Thomas Joseph White, OP, “Epidemic Danger and Catholic Sacraments,” *First Things* (April 9, 2020), www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/04/epidemic-danger-and-catholic-sacraments.

covenant of God the Father to the world through his passion, death, and resurrection. His mission is the centrality of the Christian faith and the basis of eschatological hope. Congar poetically describes how in Christ, “the true relation [is] established between God and man, all the prophetic writings are clarified and blended together in harmony. As at Cana, tasteless water becomes a full-flavored, inspiring wine, the veil is lifted and things that before seemed meaningless take on their meaning.”⁶⁷ God’s eschatological promise is that the glory of each individual will be revealed in the Body of Christ. The veil of the sin-riddled, selfish, and individualistic earthbound mind is lifted so that humanity can rejoice in the glory of God flowing through the communion of saints abiding within the beatific vision. Pentecost, depicted in Acts, provides a glimpse into this glorious Spirit-driven communion (Acts 2:42–47). Amidst great diversity, each person experiences the fullness of life as they are guided by apostolic teaching announcing the transformative revelation of Jesus Christ.

PRACTICAL PASTORAL HEALING REMEDIES

Finally, this paper’s third component applies Congar’s teachings as practical pastoral healing remedies for the individualistic tendencies of the present age. In 2018, a study conducted at the University of California San Diego monitored 340 participants whose ages ranged from 27 to 101. The researchers found that the severity of loneliness and age had a complex relationship, with increased loneliness reports especially from the participants in their late 20s, mid 50s, and late 80s. Multiple types of surveys were used to gather this data.⁶⁸ An important outcome of this study was that participants who indicated that they sought out pursuits of wisdom, such as study, hobbies, volunteer positions, as well as actions of compassion and other prosocial behaviors, reported less loneliness. Even if people were within the specified age ranges of higher prevalence of loneliness and lived alone, when intellectually stimulated and engaged in self-transcendent pursuits, feelings of loneliness diminished.

From the neurobiological perspective, pursuing wisdom is categorized into six general categories. These include: 1) prosocial attitudes and behaviors, such as seeking to contribute to a common good or having positive emotions and behaviors toward others; 2) social decision-making and the ability to deal with life’s problems; 3)

⁶⁷ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 390.

⁶⁸ Ellen E. Lee, Colin Depp, Barton W. Palmer, Danielle Glorioso, Rebecca Daly, Jinyuan Liu, Xin M. Tu, Ho-Cheol Kim, Peri Tarr, Yasunori Yamada, and Dilip V. Jeste, “High Prevalence and Adverse Health Effects of Loneliness in Community-Dwelling Adults Across the Lifespan: Role of Wisdom as a Protective Factor,” *International Psychogeriatrics* 31, no. 10 (2019): 1447–1462.

emotional homeostasis and the ability to regulate one's reaction to adversity; 4) reflection and self-understanding including reflection on the transcendent; 5) tolerance when evaluating phenomena from multiple perspectives; 6) adaptability to ambiguity.⁶⁹ Putting these wisdom categories into practical practices, Cacioppo gives advice to combat loneliness. He says: "The simplest moments of connection, especially when they involve 'feeding others,' carry an emotional uplift that does not require taking a pill, working up a sweat, or eating truckloads of cruciferous vegetables."⁷⁰ From the neuro-psychological perspective, simple but intentional behaviors of wisdom, which necessarily involve self-transcendence, allow body chemistry to change, behavioral patterns to shift, neuro-plasticity to adjust from negative feedback loops to positive ones, new habits of compassion to take effect, negative and self-defeating perspectives to be replaced with positive ones, and loneliness to be transformed into wisdom, care, compassion, social engagement, and hope.⁷¹

Congar writes about the transformational actions in which Christians engage when participating in the sacraments of the Church: "Baptism makes us be conceived and born as sons of God within the Church," which emphasized the importance of unity, social engagement, and connection to a greater whole, a *supra-ecclesial community*. Congar continues: "Confirmation enables us to participate in Christ's messianic anointing." This missioning is the powerful healing remedy to disengagement and isolation. Each Christian is entrusted with the duty to serve Christ and His Church. Confirmation imparts the Holy Spirit, whose grace transforms individuals, encouraging each person to participate in tasks far bigger than self-absorbed concerns or self-immanence.⁷² Congar explains: "God created a body, then gave it breath. Christ means 'anointed.' In the writings of the Fathers and in the liturgy, we cannot be fulfilled as 'Christians' unless our spiritual anointing is expressed visibly and tangibly."⁷³ Finally, when participating in the Eucharist, individuals

⁶⁹ Thomas W. Meeks and Dilip V. Jeste, "Neurobiology of Wisdom: A Literature Overview," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 66, no. 4 (2009): 356.

⁷⁰ Cacioppo and Patrick, *Loneliness*, 237.

⁷¹ See Monika Ardelit and Dilip V. Jeste, "Wisdom and Hard Times: The Ameliorating Effect of Wisdom on the Negative Association between Adverse Life Events and Wellbeing," *Journal of Gerontology: Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 73, no. 8 (2018): 1374–1383.

⁷² For a source of Congar's thought on the transformative action of the Holy Spirit, see Gregory the Great, *In librum primum Regum expositio* 4.4 (PL 79, 267b): "Habent ergo electi praedicatores experientiam Spiritus in se loquentis in repentina revelatione veritatis, habent in subito ardore caritatis, habent in plenitudine scientiae, habent facundissima verbi praedicatione: nam et subito instruuntur et repente fervere et in momento replentur et mirabili eloquii potestate ditantur."

⁷³ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 3, 219.

form communion by putting aside tendencies for isolation. A communal bond is formed as individuals come together, share their vast array of charisms, and participate in an enterprise far greater than individual tasks.⁷⁴ Each person grows toward authenticity and holiness by participating in the shared rituals and embodying the living traditions of the Body of Christ. Congar writes: “It is a common saying of the Fathers that men are begotten in belief, and that they themselves in turn beget, by speaking or teaching; in other words, in establishing through the unity of the community the spiritual or moral milieu in which we are formed according to faith.”⁷⁵ In the communion between God and humanity present in the life of the Church—which is participation in the sacraments as well as service of neighbors—relationships are forged, social-engagement is enlivened, and the healing of loneliness can begin.

In conclusion, the modern crisis of social isolation is a devastating and lethal phenomenon encompassing many dimensions of human life: sociological, psychological, neuro-psychological, and spiritual. Loneliness and disengagement leave existential longings within the hearts and minds of persons, causing depression, anxiety, and the fragmentation of community. Yves Congar’s ecclesiological and pneumatological theology explicates the fulfillment of humanity’s deepest longings when individuals gather as a communal body realized in the ideal form of the Church. When people share their unique charisms gained through the grace of the Holy Spirit for the good of the community, a healing grace permeates into individual hearts and restores communal relationships. Congar’s vision of communion and life in the Church may have idealistic notions, yet he also admits that the Church is fractured and composed of sinners. Driven by faith, Congar teaches that the grace of the Holy Spirit perfects human life, in its communal and individual dimensions. The unified life of love within the Trinity is perceivable when individuals participate together in liturgies and the sacraments and engage in compassionate service to fellow persons. These are the activities of the Church that manifest the embodiment of the Holy Spirit, the source of divine unity. When each person becomes receptive to the action of the Holy Spirit and is vivified through love as a *supra-ecclesial community*, then the Kingdom of God, the unified Body of Christ in the fullness of human life, is at hand. **M**

⁷⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre discusses a very similar vision of human community and uses the term “reciprocal indebtedness.” See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Peru, IL: Carus, 2001), 99–146.

⁷⁵ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 328.

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