



Living in Isolation

TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE

A few weeks ago, waiting to go through security in Tel Aviv airport, I watched the maneuverings of the young man before me in the queue. As we shuffled forward, he always had a suitcase five feet in front of him and behind, so that no one could get near him. He may have been wise, but it was a powerful symbol of what the virus means for millions of people: isolation, keeping one's distance. The very presence of others may be a threat, as one may be for them.

Isolation can be more terrible than death. We must all die, and for many it comes as a welcome relief. But isolation saps our very humanity: grandparents being isolated from their grandchildren, lovers separated from each other. We are touched into life by each other, from tiny touches to making love. A character in a novel by Jonathan Safran Foer says: "Touching him was always so important to me. It was something I lived for. I never could explain why. Little, nothing touches. My fingers against his shoulder. The outsides of our thighs touching as we squeezed together on the bus." When the coronavirus threatens, life-giving touch might become deadly.

The evening before I flew, I went to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and entered the tomb where Jesus is supposed to have lain for three days. The crux of the Christian faith is a man who died in utter isolation. He was lifted up on the cross above the crowd, beyond touch, made into a naked object. He seemed even to have felt separated from his Father, and his last words, according to Mark and Matthew's gospels, were: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" In that moment he embraced more than just our deaths. He made his very own the loneliness that we all endure sometimes and that tens of millions live today.

On the night before he died, that isolation was already palpable. He gathered his closest friends around him for a last supper. One of them had already sold him to the people who sought his life; Peter, his Rock, was about to deny he even knew him, and most of the others would take to their heels. In this most chilling moment, he did something utterly startling, taking the bread and wine, and saying "this is my body and blood, given for you."

When the community was falling apart and everyone faced the future alone, he made the promise of a new communion, which would be stronger than betrayal and cowardice and which nothing could destroy, even death. When the churches are shut and public worship ceases for a while, that promise still holds and the gift is still given.

So, yes, this awful virus may cut us off from each other physically, and that is a profound deprivation. But Christians believe that all our loneliness is embraced in a communion that pierces through every barricade. The risen Lord comes through the locked door behind which the disciples had placed themselves in self-isolation and lifts their fear and loneliness.

Even if we cannot get to the Eucharist, we can still enact symbols of communion. In Northern Ireland, a hotel offered to deliver free meals to people stuck inside their homes: "Call us before 1 pm and order a meal. We will deliver dinner to you that evening—there is no charge for food or delivery." In Italy, people came out onto their balconies and sang to each other. Music reached into every room to embrace people in their loneliness. Indeed, music has an ability to express a hope beyond our words. The opera about 9/11, *Between Worlds*, by Tansy Davies, had its world premiere in 2015. Some were shocked that anyone should compose an opera about such a horrible event, but perhaps it is the only way to

**St Mary's
Parish**

**Serving
the
Community**

**Serving
the
Family**

**Serving
the
City**

Contacts: Fr Fachtna McCarthy, Administrator, Fr Patrick Claffey C.C. Fr Josip Levaković C.C., Deacon Greg Pepper Tel 01-6600075

Streaming and Website www.stmaryshaddingtonroad.ie email: info@stmaryshaddingtonroad.ie

Child Protection: <http://www.stmaryshaddingtonroad.ie/ministries/child-protection/> also www.csp.dublindiocese.ie

Streaming also at www.churchservices.tv/haddingtonroad

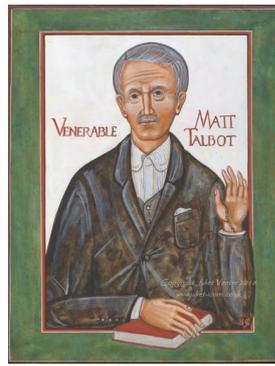
Funded by Living the Joy of the Gospel Campaign

face its brutality. Nicholas Drake, the librettist, said that “putting the transforming power of music at the heart of the drama, we thought, might allow us to weigh the tragedy of what happened on 9/11, and yet discover some kind of light in that darkness. Music even seems to have played a role in helping some people on that day. A security guard sang hymns to those descending the stairs, to give them courage. Some relatives, lost for words as they spoke to loved ones on the phone, sang together.”

Yes, millions of us must endure isolation, but what are the gestures that we can make that put us in touch with those whom we cannot touch? It may be by buying food for those who cannot get out and leaving it on their steps, by phoning and texting. Small gestures can speak of profound belonging.

Every Eucharist recalls what Jesus did in the face of death, defying its threat of ultimate isolation. I was never so aware of this as I was while saying Mass in Syria, less than five miles from the frontline, when gunfire could be heard not far off. The threat of violence was ever present, and yet hope found expression in our singing and in reenacting that gesture of self-gift that nothing could destroy. Even when I cannot get out to join the community in prayer, God remains present, as St Augustine wrote, “in my deepest interiority.” However lonely I feel, I am not alone, for at the core of my very being is Another.

TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, OP, is a former Master of the worldwide Dominican Order, which he entered in 1965. His new book, *Alive in God: A Christian Imagination*, has just been published by Bloomsbury.



Holiness Today

Where do we encounter holiness today? What does it mean for us to seek to be holy? Through canonization, the Church seeks out some who become models for us of what holiness means. Holiness however is not something that is just institutionalised. Holiness

is within the reach of each of us. Think of the Venerable Matt Talbot, who was baptized in this Pro-Cathedral and lived a deep spiritual life as a humble worker in this area of Dublin at a time when this part of Dublin was at its poorest. He lived the life of a poor worker, yet his spiritual director called him the holiest man in Dublin.

We encounter holiness not in special categories of Christians. The Second Vatican Council spoke about a “universal call to holiness.” We are all called to holiness. Holiness is not about retreating into holy places or holy postures. Holiness is found and cultivated in the realities of life.

When we talk of the Communion of Saints we speak about the link with those who have gone before us, but the doctrine of the Communion of the Saints also demands that we look towards those who are beside us today. The doctrine of the Communion of Saints demands that we become saints to those around us – our children, our spouses, our community, our society, the marginalized and the rejected – showing what it really means to be the Church, what it means to live and witness to the love and the mercy of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

(Excerpt from the homily Archbishop Diaruid Martin on Feast of All-Saints, Pro-Cathedral, Dublin)



On Winter Leaves and Dying

"How beautifully they go to their graves - how gently lay themselves down - & turn to mould. They stoop to rise - to mount higher in coming years. They teach us how to die."

(Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, 1837-1861)

In Memoriam

+

Sunday 15 November

9.30: Niall Moloney, Anniversary

11am: Anne and Eddie Dempsey

Nellie McInerney

Peter Dowling

21 November

11am: Maurice Wright, Anniversary