

**BOOK LAUNCH**  
**MATTHEW FFORDE**  
*LA PASTORALE DELLA SOLITUDINE. UNA NUOVA PROPOSTA,*  
**CANTAGALLI, SIENA 2020**  
*PASTORAL CARE FOR LONELINESS. A NEW APOSTOLATE,*  
**GRACEWING, LEOMINSTER 2023**  
LUMSA, Rome, 22 November 2024

Dear Rector,

Esteemed Lecturers,

Dear Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Matthew Fforde,

The book that today we are launching here together forms a part of the project set in motion by the author's *Desocialisation. The Crisis of Post-Modernity*, a work that won the Capri-San Michele Prize in 2006 and has been published in six languages, and is a valuable contribution to Christian thought about contemporary Western societies.

This work on pastoral care for loneliness, carrying on from the previous work on desocialisation, is a constructive contribution to the development of Christian witness – in the form of pastoral care – in response to the growing pandemic of isolation and loneliness in Western societies, the cause of which the author locates principally in the decline of Christian culture.

This work, inspired by the values and perspectives of our Christian faith, is thus a work of hope, *spes contra spem*; an interesting contribution to the Catholic Church's 'new evangelisation'; and a response to the instruction of Christ to care for the afflicted.

A 'spectre is now haunting Western societies', declares Fforde, 'the spectre of loneliness', and starting from this observation he presents a picture of social phenomena in Great Britain which can be found throughout the Western world, including Italy, and which are increasingly emerging in other parts of the world.

In Great Britain the decline of the family has increased the number of people living alone. One need only think that in 1961 12% of households were made up of one person; by 2010 this had already risen to 29%. By 2010 there were 7.5 million people living alone in the United Kingdom and this was not a phenomenon above all of the elderly: 55% of these people were under the age of 65. The Loneliness Commission founded by the Labour MP Jo Cox published a report in 2017. It makes very sad reading. It found that over 9 million adults are often or always lonely, over a half of parents have problems of loneliness, and television is the chief form of company for 3.6 million people.

The author sees this increasing loneliness and isolation as part of a wider process of disaggregation of society and refers to high levels of crime, anti-social behaviour, a detachment of the governed from their governors accompanied by a growing distrust in political institutions, and a decline in associations which involve face-to-face interaction. Fforde also stresses that mass society compounds the problem by creating contexts where people feel anonymity and non-belonging. On this point the author argues that it is fitting ‘to comment on the use of domestic technology as an erroneous response to loneliness...The growing taste for ‘fantasy’ in cinema and literature of recent decades forms a part of an escapism prompted by loneliness. The flight into television and DVDs has been known for a long time but the Internet has opened up opportunities in this field that are truly astounding. The passing of endless hours surfing on Internet...places individuals not in face-to-face relationships but in a virtual world fraught with dangers’.

Such observations dwelt in the lives of each one of us during the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic which imposed limitations upon interpersonal relationships to prevent the risk of contagion. The hope expressed by very many people, also expressed in objective ways with pictures and in written form, was that this experience could make people and society more sensitive to a parallel pandemic underway for many decades which demonstrates the same dynamic towards isolation and loneliness, namely that of ‘social distancing’. Unfortunately, it appears that these good resolutions have still not yet found fertile ground, but, instead, a lifestyle that privileges one’s own interests over those of other people has been growing more intense.

God said: ‘It is not good that man should be alone (Gn 2:18). As the author argues, humans are called to be part of a community, and he here cites the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* where it declares: ‘The human person needs to

live in society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition. Through the exchange with others, mutual service and dialogue with his brethren, man develops his potential; he thus responds to his vocation'.<sup>1</sup> 'One of the deepest forms of poverty a person can experience is isolation, observed Benedict XVI, 'Man is alienated when he is alone'.<sup>2</sup> It comes as no surprise, therefore, that this mass loneliness causes suffering in those that are afflicted by it. As an example of this, one need only observe that in July 2018 a British national newspaper, in an article with the headline 'Doctors Using Anti-Depressants to Treat Epidemic of Loneliness', reported that 11% of the age group of 18-24, 19% of the age group of 40-59, and 20% of the age group of the over 60s were prescribed anti-depressants in 2017.

The last two Popes have drawn attention to the dynamics described in this book. In 2005 Pope Benedict XVI observed that in economically highly developed countries at the origins of new forms of mental illness experts 'also find the negative impact of the crisis of moral values. This increases the feeling of loneliness, undermining and even breaking up traditional forms of social cohesion, starting with the family institution'.<sup>3</sup> In his speech to the European Parliament in 2014 Pope Francis declared in the same way: 'one of the most common diseases in Europe today is the *loneliness* typical of those who have no connection with others. This is especially true of the elderly, who are often abandoned to their fate, and also in the young'.<sup>4</sup>

Such statements are not an isolated voice – they are an echo of very many views and experiences of the Church which since her beginnings has been defined as a 'community of believers'. One need only cite St. Teresa of Calcutta who in one of her works, the outcome of daily experience, observed that: 'The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy, it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair and hopelessness is love'.<sup>5</sup> On the occasion of the thanksgiving Mass for the canonisation of Mother Teresa of 2016 I wanted to refer to: 'A form of poverty present even in those countries and families that are less poor, even in people belonging to categories that have access to means and opportunities, but which experience the inner emptiness of having lost meaning

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1879.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 53.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, *Message for the Fourteenth World Day of the Sick*, 8 December 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, France*, 25 November 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path*, compiled by Lucinda Varley (Random House, Ebury Digital, London 2011). p. 74.

and direction in life, or who are violently struck by the desolation of broken bonds, of the harshness of loneliness, or the feeling of being forgotten by all or of not being of use to anyone'.<sup>6</sup>

In chapter four, and in more detailed form in his previous *Desocialisation. The Crisis of Post-Modernity*, the author tries to explain the causes of the pandemic of loneliness in the West. He addresses a subject which is not commonly addressed by the secular sensibility: the consequences of the withdrawal of Christian culture. With a background as a historian, he emphasises that chronologically the decline of Christian culture has coincided with the decline in social ties – we are dealing with the last sixty years or so. Indeed, as the author observes, the huge number of people living alone and the low levels of religious faith are something new in Western civilisation. From this point of view, our age is without precedent. The author argues that the two phenomena are causally interconnected.

He points to the presence of an anthropological revolution that has taken place with 'deChristianisation'. The idea that man has an eternal immaterial soul has been increasingly replaced by 'materialist' models of man, for example that we are our bodies, or advanced animals, or the products of society. He also perceives an epistemological revolution. Pope Benedict XVI shortly before his election declared that we are building a 'dictatorship of relativism'<sup>7</sup> and the author describes relativism as 'an authentic philosophy of the void', a 'revolution in favour of nothing'. A great concern is that these revolutions, and the ideas associated with them, will be increasingly exported to countries outside the West in an example of what Pope Francis has called 'ideological colonisation'.<sup>8</sup>

Fforde makes two observations. Firstly, that in not recognising the existence of the soul there is an absence of care for the soul and the achievement of its health. Relativism by arguing that 'truth' is a point of view in fact murders truth. Love for love and for truth, which should be at the centre of this care of the soul and is at the centre of the Gospel message, thus receives a dual attack. The consequence is that the deeply socialising impact of love for love and for truth – the essential component of authentic community at all levels – is greatly

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<sup>6</sup> Cardinal Pietro Parolin, *Thanksgiving Mass for the Canonisation of Mother Teresa: Eyes Open to Suffering, Embraced with Compassion*, 5 September 2016.

<sup>7</sup> *Homily of His Eminence Joseph Ratzinger Dean of the College of Cardinals*, during the Mass 'Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice', 18 April 2005.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Pope Francis, *Apostolic Journey to Sri Lanka and the Philippines (12-19 January 2015), Address to Families* (16 January 2015).

weakened. Secondly, the materialist visions of man which seek to replace Christian anthropology (together with the consequences of relativism) act by various mechanisms to generate a lifestyle of ‘selfish individualism’ which is a powerful dissolvent of authentic social ties and a generator of loneliness.

Pope Francis described this phenomenon in the following way when he addressed the Camillians in May 2022: ‘Our time is marked by individualism and indifference, which generate loneliness and the throwing away of many lives. This is our culture today. Individualism, indifference, which generate loneliness and cause rejection: the throwaway culture’.<sup>9</sup>

Jacque Maritain had important comments to make on the non-spiritual conceptions of man that Fforde sees as the culprits of our present predicament: ‘Materialistic conceptions of the world and life, philosophies which do not recognise the eternal and spiritual element in man, cannot escape error in their efforts to construct a truly human society because they cannot satisfy the requirements of the person, and, by that very fact, they cannot grasp the nature of society’.<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis in his speech to the European Parliament expressed great concern about the impact of such ‘materialistic conceptions’. ‘Today there is a tendency to claim ever broader individual rights – I am tempted to say individualistic; underlying this is a conception of the human person as detached from all social and anthropological concepts, as if the person were a “monad”...increasingly unconcerned with other surrounding “monads”...the rights of the individual are upheld, without regard for the fact that each human being is part of a social context’.<sup>11</sup>

The phenomenon that the author describes is also becoming increasingly a subject for reflection of the ordinary pastoral care of the Church, and as the author says in the title of the first chapter: this is ‘a time to act’.

Fforde offers a strategy to react to the pandemic of loneliness which he rightly sees as a ‘sign of the times’. *Gaudium et spes* (n. 4) declares that ‘the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel’. In proposing a new social ministry, a new apostolate, a new form of pastoral care, to address this ‘sign of the times’, Fforde roots his thinking in the teachings of the Gospel. He declares that ‘In following Christ who

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<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to Participants in the General Chapter of the Order of the Ministers of the Sick (Camillians)*, 16 May 2022.

<sup>10</sup> J. Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (Geoffrey Bless, London, 1948), p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, France*, 25 November 2014.

in his ministry here on earth cured people of their afflictions and ordered his disciples to do likewise (Lk 9:2), and told us that in helping the afflicted we would help him (Mt 23: 35-40), Christians are now called to heal Western man of this epidemic of our epoch and to relieve the suffering that it imposes'. Invoking the parable of the Good Samaritan, he hopes that one can come to the aid 'of those at the side of the road who have not been robbed and beaten by brigands (Lk 10:30) but ignored, marginalised and abandoned by their fellows'.

The launching of pastoral care for loneliness fully aligns with the magisterium of the Holy Father. The papacy of Pope Francis has been marked by a great emphasis on 'mercy' and coming to the aid of the lonely is an act of mercy. The Pope has also stressed the need to counter what he defines as a 'waste' or 'throwaway' culture. We may assert that the millions of people condemned to loneliness and isolation are examples of individuals who have been 'thrown away', with their contributions to society 'wasted'. Integrating them through pastoral care for loneliness would help to counter this reality. In addition, the Holy Father has often talked about the need to bring help to the 'fringes'. Are not the lonely in a metaphorical sense other fringes and cannot pastoral care for the lonely act to include them? Lastly, the Supreme Pontiff has called for an 'outward bound Church'. Pastoral care for loneliness could be a way of moving towards those in need, just as St. Camillus de Lellis did at the end of the sixteenth century, wandering around Rome to find sick people that he could help and urging his companions to do the same.

Lastly, the author seeks to define the organisation and character of pastoral care for loneliness. Fundamentally, he envisages a central advisory body, offices for this kind of pastoral care in the bishops' conferences, and special teams in the dioceses and in groups of parishes. He describes how these teams can perform a series of functions, being for example accompanying centres, attracting centres, aggregation centres, and advice centres. He also suggests the creation of a special task force, the 'Gethsemanists', who could seek to help those who suffer from extreme isolation.

Pastoral care for loneliness is not only a way of trying to counter the consequences of deChristianisation – it is also potentially a way of providing energy to the Catholic Church, perhaps even a pathway to revitalisation. In his ministry on earth, Christ linked healing to the spread of the Gospel. In developing pastoral care for loneliness, in helping people who suffer from loneliness, in

offering this witness, Christians can make what they are, and what they believe in, more credible.

At the end of this launch of a book which first of all offers witness to the faith of its author and, I hope, will be able to inspire pastoral decisions and choices that help to generate community, I wish to emphasise that believers who have to endure loneliness amongst their fellows in this world because of their faith are not alone. The faithful have as a gift a special strength in facing up to this pandemic and in seeking to counter it. They belong to the ecclesial community, they form a part of the ‘communion of saints’, and they are accompanied by Christ and the Holy Virgin. As Benedict XVI said at the beginning of his Petrine ministry: ‘Those who believe are never alone’.<sup>12</sup>

Thank you.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin

(Translation by Matthew Fforde)

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<sup>12</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily at Mass for the Imposition of the Pallium and the Conferral of the Fisherman’s Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome*, 25 April 2005.