



# The Social Nature of the Human Person

Fr. Roger J. Landry • Napa Institute • July 26, 2024



# What It Means To Be Human

- Yesterday we focused on several aspects of an adequate anthropology
  - Msgr. James Shea spoke on what it means to be a creature, fallen and redeemed.
  - Dr. Carl Trueman examined our natural hunger for the truth.
  - Dr. Andrew Abela described how the virtues empower our second nature.
  - Sr. Esther Mary Nickel, RSM, pondered how the worship of God helps make us fully human and more and more like the God we adore.
  - Mary Hasson scrutinized the destructive roots of gender ideology and how we are called to live with integrity and courage the truth of our having been made male and female. She also summoned us, with kindness, patience, prudence and all the virtues and tools we have, to share that life-saving and affirming truth with others.
- During this second day we seek to build on those foundations as we focus more deeply on the social nature of the human person, on the family, on our work and on our need for communion.



# The Social Nature of the Person

- We are made in the image and likeness of God.
- This does not mean just that we think and choose with reason and will like God.
- Because God is a loving communion of persons, it means, as St. John Paul II emphasized, that we are made to live and dwell in a communion of love, too.
- This is obviously true about the family. “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.”
- But it is true more broadly. We are made in relation to others. First to God. Then to other.
- “It is not good for man to be alone.” We need fitting helpers to discover who we really are, and we are called to be those fitting helpers for others.



## Created in and for Relation to Others

- As children we are born into relations of origin with a mom and dad, perhaps for some an adoptive mom and dad, with brothers and sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, godparents, neighbors, eventually friends and other relations.
- The ultimate purpose of our social nature, our relations of origin, is to love. We are made in the image of God who is love. We have, as John Paul II stressed, a nuptial nature, meant to be given as a gift to others, from which exchange flows a true communion of persons.
- Our nature is meant to take us from original solitude, where we were able to recognize that we're different from God and from animals, to longing for communion, to that communion through mutual self-giving love.

# The Disintegration Caused by Sin

- But we have to use our freedom well and order it to that end.
- We know the legacy of the abuse of our freedom not to love but to sin. Sin leads us ultimately to asocial behavior, to withdrawing from communion, to instrumentalizing others to our own ends, even to harming or seeking to destroy others.
- The evil one, who never stops trying to attack the divine image in which we have been made, never ceases to try to divide us from God and from others and to lead us on the path of personal and social disintegration.
- We see that in original sin. We see that in every sin. The evil one seeks to isolate us, even when we are physically in others' presence, so that he might isolate us eternally.



# The Problem of Loneliness and Isolation

- Because of our social nature, the epidemic of loneliness is a particular concern. There have been many studies of increasing loneliness, like Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000).
- Many people are living contrary to their nature — not just with regard to their biological sex, but also their social nature — and it is both leaving them lost but also at risk of several harmful consequences.
- In 2023, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, released an Advisory Report entitled *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*. He wrote: “Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity. And the harmful consequences of a society that lacks social connection can be felt in our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations, where performance, productivity, and engagement are diminished.”

## Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation

2023

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community



# Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation

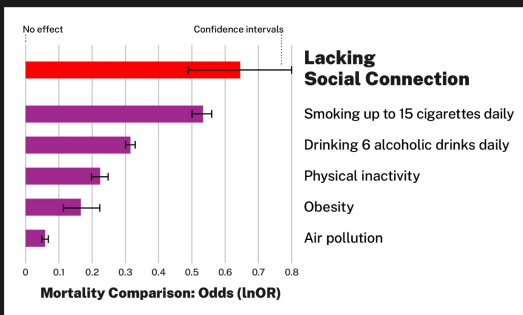
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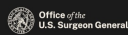
The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community



**Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.**



Comparison groups: Complex measures of social integration: high v. low; not smoking v. smoking < 15 cigarettes daily; alcohol abstinence v. drinking > 6 alcoholic drinks daily; physical activity v. inactivity; low BMI v. high BMI; low air pollution v. high air pollution.  
Source: Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. *American Psychology*. 2017;72(6):517-530. doi:10.1037/amp000103. This graph is a visual approximation.



# The Multiple Harms of Loneliness and Isolation

- The lack of social connection poses a significant risk for individual health and lifespan.
- Loneliness and social isolation increase the risk for premature death by 26 and 29 percent, respectively.
- Lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.
- Insufficient social connection is associated with a 29 percent increased risk of heart disease and a 32 percent increased risk of stroke. It is associated with increased risk for anxiety, depression, and dementia. It may increase susceptibility to viruses and respiratory illness.
- Loneliness and isolation are associated with lower academic achievement and worse performance at work. In the U.S., stress-related absenteeism attributed to loneliness costs employers an estimated \$154 billion annually. Social isolation among senior citizens accounts for an estimated \$6.7 billion in excess Medicare spending annually.

# Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation

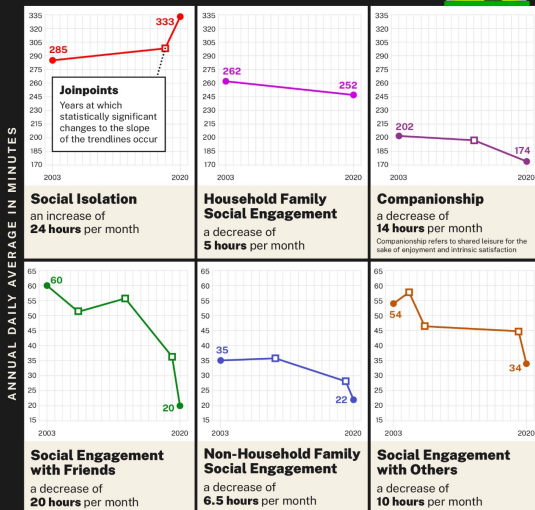
2023

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community



## National Trends for Social Connection

From 2003 to 2020, time spent alone increased, while time spent on in-person social engagement decreased.



YEAR

Source: Adapted from Vijl, Diane Kamin, Peter J. Weisz, US Trends in Social Isolation, Social Engagement, and Companionship: Nationality and by Age, Sex, Race/Ethnicity, Family Income, and Work Hours, 2003-2020. SSRN Population Health, Volume 21, 2023. The joinpoints are visual approximations.

Office of the U.S. Surgeon General

# The Problem of Loneliness

- Murthy: “Social connection is a fundamental human need, as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter.”
- “Throughout history, our ability to rely on one another has been crucial to survival. ... Human beings are biologically wired for social connection. Our brains have adapted to expect proximity to others. Our distant ancestors relied on others to help them meet their basic needs. Living in isolation, or outside the group, means having to fulfill the many difficult demands of survival on one’s own.”
- In 2022, only 39 percent of adults in the U.S. said that they felt very connected to others. Recent surveys have found that approximately half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness.
- The rate of loneliness among young adults has increased every year between 1976 and 2019



# Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation

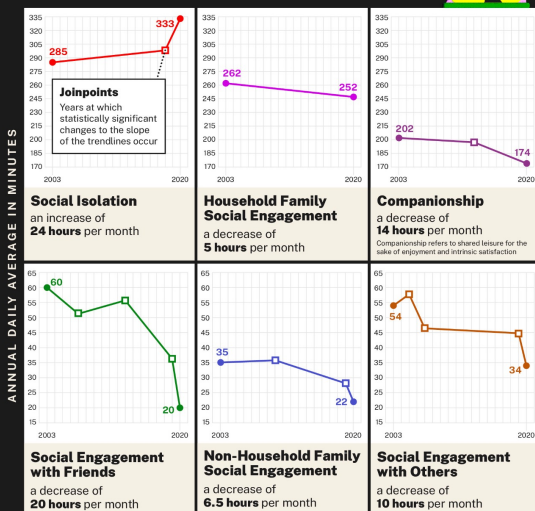
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# The Multiple Harms of Loneliness and Isolation

- Loneliness and isolation are more widespread than many of the other major health issues of our day, including smoking (12.5 percent of U.S. adults), diabetes (14.7), and obesity (41.9), and with comparable levels of risk to health and premature death.
- In 2018, only 16 percent of Americans reported that they felt very attached to their local community.
- Membership in organizations that have been important pillars of community connection have declined significantly in this time.
- In 2020, only 47 percent of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque. This is down from 70 percent in 1999 and represents a dip below 50 percent for the first time in the history of the survey question.

# Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation



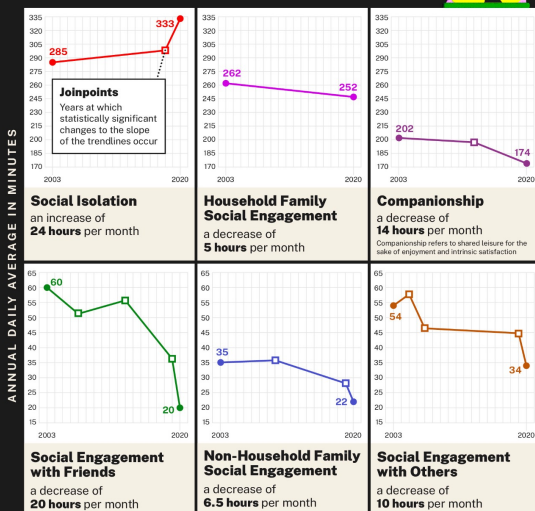
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# The Effects of Technology on Loneliness and Isolation

- One-in-three U.S. adults 18 and over report that they are online “almost constantly,” and the percentage of teens ages 13 to 17 years who say they are online “almost constantly” has doubled since 2015.
- Technology use can displace in-person engagement, monopolize our attention, reduce the quality of our interactions, and even diminish our self-esteem, which can lead to greater loneliness, fear of missing out, conflict, and reduced social connection.
- In one study, participants who reported using social media for more than two hours a day had about double the odds of reporting increased perceptions of social isolation compared to those who used social media for less than 30 minutes per day.
- Chronic loneliness and social isolation can increase the risk of developing dementia by approximately 50 percent in older adults, even after controlling for demographics and health status. A study that followed older adults over 12 years found that cognitive abilities declined 20 percent faster among those who reported loneliness.
- Another study of over 500,000 middle-aged adults found that among men, deaths due to suicide are associated with loneliness and more strongly with indicators of objective isolation such as living alone. The probability of dying by suicide more than doubled among men who lived alone. The same study showed that for women loneliness was significantly associated with hospitalization for self-harm.

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## The Remedies

- The Surgeon General proposes some remedies, as we can see in the attached graphic: strengthening social infrastructure, enacting pro-connection public policies, building a culture of connection, increasing awareness in general and in the health sector in particular, and reforming digital environments.
- The report ducks the most obvious remedies, likely because they would be considered controversial in our present secularized cultural climate. For us as Catholics, however, we must will the means and seek to live as Light.
- Promoting Marriage and the Family, which are truly committed relations with lifelong social bonds. The U.S. marriage rate is at an historic low, 6.5/1000 people, the lowest since 1867 when statistics first started being kept.
- Cultivating Friendships. Christ called us to love others as he has loved us and he called us friends.
- Strengthening one's engagement with one's faith and with the Church.
- Seeking forgiveness and extending it to others.
- Forming people to be true peace-makers.



# Jesus' Great Remedy

- Jesus' saving mission was to redeem what was broken in the human person, including the triple alienation brought by original sin: the wound in communion with God, with others and within oneself.
- He had come to restore the human person's capacity to receive, remain in, reciprocate and share love.
- He did that of course by his incarnation. He did it by his passion, death and resurrection. But he seeks to do it by means of the summit of salvation history, which is his Eucharistic self-gift.
- In the Eucharist, Jesus seeks to perfect the social nature of the human person by bringing us into holy communion with God and with others.
- By means of this sacrament, he not only seeks to help us to live according to the divine image but, mysteriously and wondrously, to bring us into the life of the Trinity.



# Jesus' Redemption of the Social Nature of the Human Person

- Jesus' whole mission can be looked at from within the context of seeking to restore man's social nature to live in a loving communion of persons made in God's image.
- During the Last Supper, he prayed three times that we might be one, just as he and the Father are one, so that the world may know that the Father sent him and loves us just as much as He loves Jesus.
- He taught us to pray in the first-person plural, so that we pray for, and in, loving communion. He incentivized our prayer with other by saying "When two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."
- The Eucharist is supposed to make us "one body, one spirit in Christ." St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure, both of whose 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary the Church celebrates this year, taught that the *res tantum* (the ultimate effect of the celebration of Mass) is for the Holy Spirit to unite us as Christ's body and bride.

# The Eucharistic Revival of the Human Social Nature

- The Eucharistic Revival is meant not only to help us remedy the troubling ecclesiastical situation of insufficient Eucharistic knowledge, faith, amazement, gratitude, love and life, but also to extend this pinnacle of Jesus' redemptive work and revive people's receptivity and response to Jesus' frontal attack on human alienation through sin and the existential loneliness that results.
- The National Eucharistic Pilgrimage was meant to manifest that we are a "pilgrim Church on earth," walking together with Christ and with the rest of his disciples to the heavenly Jerusalem. Our pilgrimage is not solo, but joint with Christ and others.
- The National Eucharistic Congress is meant, literally, to bring us together as *ekklesia* (Church). One of the most beautiful and unforgettable experiences of the tenth National Eucharistic Congress was this unity as we adored the Lord together, processed together, and celebrated Mass together.



# Cooperating with the Redeemer's Eucharistic Restoration

- One of the big challenges of the Revival is to make the truth about the Eucharistic Jesus and what he seeks to do for us by means of this “Res Mirabilis” (Wondrous Reality) practical.
- Do we truly cooperate with what Jesus is trying to do by means of the Holy Eucharist and enter into Holy Communion with him and others, to live a truly Eucharistic life?
- Five of six Catholics in the U.S. don't come to Mass on any given Lord's Day. The Revival is seeking to address that in this missionary phase just begun, trying to invite one person back at a time.
- But of those who do come, do we genuinely seek the reestablishment of communion with others according to our social nature that Jesus desires and the Holy Spirit has been sent to bring about?



# Cooperating with the Redeemer's Eucharistic Restoration

- Do we worship as individuals, or small cliques, rather than as the family of God?
- Do we desire communion with the others with whom we worship at a given Mass, and more broadly, with all our spiritual brothers and sisters? Or do we prefer to worship more or less as strangers who happen to find the same Mass convenient?
- This is more than the lack of opposition to communion if it happens. This means a positive desire for what Jesus himself desires.
- The story of the French Canadians and the Portuguese at St. Anthony of Padua Parish in New Bedford, MA.





# Cooperating with the Redeemer's Eucharistic Restoration

- This community, this unity, is a clear priority for Jesus. He once gave us the challenging words, “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother and then come and offer your gift.”
- The offering he wants us to make is ultimately the gift of love, of reconciliation, of communion.
- Jesus desires us to be, as his disciples and apostles, signs and agents of communion, those who with him the Good Shepherd gather rather than scatter the lost and isolated sheep.
- He came from heaven to earth to restore the true family of God and wants us to live the true familial dimension of our identity, reflecting the Trinitarian image in which each of us has been made, in all our complementarity.



# Our Mission to the World

- As Salt of the Earth, Light of the World and Leaven, we're called to live and work in the world as these signs and agents of communion, helping the Church live out its true vocation as "one body, one spirit in Christ" and helping the whole world rediscover, in an age of radical individualism, rampant materialism, and unsatisfying hedonism, the path to happiness, love and life.
- St. Paul VI to the United Nations in 1965: "You exist and work to unite nations, to associate States, ... to bring them together with each other. You are an association, a bridge between peoples, a network of relations among States. We are tempted to say that in a way, this characteristic of yours reflects in the temporal order what our Catholic Church intends to be in the spiritual order: one and universal. Nothing loftier can be imagined on the natural level. ... Your vocation is to bring not just some peoples but all peoples together as brothers. A difficult undertaking? Without a doubt. But this is the nature of your very noble undertaking."





# Realizing Our Social Vocation as the Imago Dei

- The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (2004) summarizes the Church's understanding, its good news, about the social nature of the human person.
- *“The human person is essentially a social being because God, who created humanity, willed it so. ... This is based on a relational subjectivity, that is, in the manner of a free and responsible being who recognizes the necessity of integrating himself in cooperation with his fellow human beings, and who is capable of communion with them on the level of knowledge and love. ... This relational characteristic takes on, in the light of faith, a more profound and enduring meaning. Made in the image and likeness of God and made visible in the universe in order to live in society and exercise dominion over the earth, the human person is for this reason called from the very beginning to life in society: God did not create man as a ‘solitary being’ but wished him to be a ‘social being.’ Social life therefore is not exterior to man: he can only grow and realize his vocation in relation with others” (CCST 149)*

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Thank you!