

YOUNG PEOPLE AND LONELINESS

Hanging from a building on one of the main streets of Athens for the past several months has been a large billboard advertisement with big red letters that reads: *YOU ARE NOT ALONE!* Undoubtedly the advertisement expresses one of today's greatest concerns. Loneliness is one of the most common human experiences throughout all time. It appears, though, that our modern society, and particularly Western civilization, has brought it to the forefront as a major issue. It is considered to be the root of many of the maladies of our society, such as suicide attempts, alcoholism, drug addictions, psychosomatic illnesses and even automobile accidents. The truth is that today's society forces us to feel our loneliness in a way that we cannot deny. Our lifestyle not only creates, but also expresses and feeds into loneliness; it leaves us bewildered and full of painful sorrow. It is a precious bane, something we try to avoid yet try to preserve.

There is a significant level of loneliness in common human experience which is not universal. On this first level, those blessed with a happy family life, professional success, with colleagues who are friends, may not feel as lonely as those who are estranged from their families and loved ones, those who are homeless, or suffer poverty, and who are socially outcast or war-stricken.

There is another level of loneliness which is common to us all. It is loneliness as a "universal" human experience. Of course, there are variations in regards to this experience. Some of the things that make people lonely in the West do not make others lonely in the East. There is a loneliness that many women experience (which many men have difficulty understanding) just as a loneliness which men experience (which some women fail to comprehend). We, as older adults, experience loneliness in a different way from those of you who are young, and the fact that we cannot fully sense this difference is one of the major causes for the generation gap. In order to try to bridge this gap, we must all understand that, throughout all the stages of our lives, each one of us attempts to probe the same mystery of

human consciousness: “*Who am I? Where do I fit in? Whom can I trust?*” In answering these questions, we all try to confirm our personal beings in relation to the world around us. We strive to balance the uniqueness of our self (our “I”) to the world of interpersonal relations (the “we”), and to realize the boundaries and limits of our human condition. What is common to us all is that, in this search for personal identity, we encounter separation and death, longing and loneliness. *The worst of these is loneliness.*

But what does it mean to be alone? Loneliness is far more than an experience. It cannot be confined to a specific feeling or a cluster of feelings (sadness, anger, etc.). It is a human condition. *To be human is to be lonely in some dark and deep place which is common to us all.*

There is a positive side to being alone which is a natural state. Each of us is an entity which will never exist again, an entity which has been created in order to be incorporated into God’s Grace and Kingdom. St. Symeon’s phrase “μόνος με τον Μόνον” (“Only with the Only”) expresses this to its fullest: it expresses a state of *being*. When I read St. Symeon’s phrase, I always think of Adam and Eve in the Garden before the Fall. They took part in each other’s “only-ness” and experienced the only-ness of the Triune God, forming a catholic harmony of oneness and unity. In order for us to grow physically, psychologically and spiritually, it is necessary for us to encounter our uniqueness as persons. Because we are no longer in the Garden, and are living in the worldliness of this world, this encounter is often a very lonely process.

There is a negative side to being alone. It is living in separation from others, making loneliness an unnatural state. Because we are not with our God and Creator, our point of reference has become our “self”. We refuse to see our uniqueness in relationship to Him, to be a communicant of His Divine Nature. Cut off from the catholicity of His love, we remain isolated and vainly try to reach wholeness, fulfillment, and harmony by and in our selves. Thus, we believe that it is necessary to reassure ourselves that we have reached fulfillment before we can genuinely relate to others. Everything outside our self becomes an object which facilitates our individualistic need to feel fulfilled.¹ Everything and everyone becomes a

product for exploitation. Since we do not live in catholic oneness with God, our mind functions separately from our heart and from our will. We say one thing, feel another, and want something entirely different. Because relationships are cultivated separately from the context of love, from the mystery of God's incomprehensible love, the relationships we cultivated become superficial and full of hypocrisy. This only causes us to continuously relate to ourselves and to the world in vain, remaining alone with our self in a world full of loneliness, trying to gratify our own needs and to verify our existence. Thus man today resembles a pelican in the wilderness, an owl in the desert. He is not able to sleep, becoming like a lonely sparrow on a roof, taunted by his fellow man (Psalm 101:7-9).

A lonely man lives in emptiness. This is the chief problem of modern man. Many people do not know what they want. It may appear that they want everything, but this is an expression of their emptiness. They may even speak of what they “should” or “should not” be doing or wanting. But here, too, it becomes apparent that they really do not have well-founded principles and values, that they do not have a wholesome sense of reality of their own goals. They often do not have a clear idea of what they feel. Soon it becomes obvious that they lack the ability to choose. They are therefore swayed back and forth by everyone and everything that can influence them. One way in which man today deals with this emptiness is by seeking out a personal “guru”, a type of personal idol, to relieve him of the responsibility to choose and decide for his self. Instead of finding someone who will help him realize who he is as a personal being, he prefers to find someone to tell him who to be. Another way in which man tries to overcome his loneliness and emptiness today is with an obsession regarding sexual concerns – not in forming loving relations (ερωτικές σχέσεις) as much as in having a sexual experience (σεξουαλικές εμπειρίες). A third way in which he tries to fill his emptiness is by forming interpersonal relationships without boundaries. He puts unrealistic expectations in his relationships in a way where they eventually become suffocating and an obstacle to growth.

All three of these attempts to heal his loneliness and fill his emptiness bring on only more emptiness and vacuous feelings, disappointment and dismay. Thus, one becomes, as T.S. Elliot says a “*Shape without form, shade without colour, a paralyzed force, gesture without*

motion".² It is this paralyzing force and gesture without motion that makes the lonely and hollow man feel powerless to do anything effective about his life. In this powerlessness, he feels threatened and this sense of helplessness only deepens his sense of despair and futility. Since it does not really make a difference what he feels, he soon gives up wanting or feeling and he puts up a wall between himself and the most precious qualities of human life. On this level, he faces the anxiety of death, the anxiety of non-existence, of losing one's being. So it is that loneliness and emptiness brings us face to face with death itself on a physical, psychological and spiritual level. There is no wonder that what characterizes man in this century is his obsession and his insecurities in relation to death. It is interesting that the billboard advertisement I mentioned at the beginning of my talk was for an insurance company. For the greatest loneliness is to experience death alone.

As we enter adult life through the period of adolescence, loneliness and emptiness are even more present. In fact, loneliness is probably one of the most characteristic traits of adolescent life, making it one of the most difficult times of development. During our adolescence, we are in a process of acquiring. We are trying to acquire a sense of mastery over our changing body. We are trying to acquire a sense of independence from childhood, trying to decipher what is now desirable, needed, and appropriate for ourselves in relation to our immediate family environment and our social circle. The questions "*Who am I? How good am I? Am I able to love and to be loved?*" are agonizing questions that keep going through our minds. We are tossed between the need for self-acceptance and the need to be accepted by others. We have a need to assert ourselves and yet hold on to our childhood, while others demand that we become more responsible. Thus, there is a greater sense of uncertainty, a greater fear of failure and rejection, a sense of guilt, and a greater need for confidence, affirmation, encouragement and intimacy. That is why friendship is so important during these years. Without friendship, it is impossible to face these dilemmas and challenges, yet, it is in our search for friendship that we face our personal difficulties and inadequacies. Because of our personal uncertainty, we rely on and many times become totally engulfed into certain groups of "friends" from which we try to draw on values, morals and what is projected as being "in" (acceptable). Very often, the friendships we seek and desire often are never achieved. It is amazing how, during a time where

acceptance and intimacy are so needed, there is so much rejection and pain. Today friendships have become more difficult and rare. In a world where there is such a lack of trust, the lack of friendship becomes even more obvious. Actually, we now live in a period of time where we are told in every form and fashion that we should not trust or have confidence in anyone! “*To whom can I talk, what can I say?*” This only increases a sense of meaninglessness and apathy. For you, who are in adolescence today, this can do nothing but to increase your sense of insecurity and loneliness. In general, today it appears that there are no strong communities to turn to, no visionary ideals to struggle for, no realistic role model to try to sustain and develop, and no assurance that your goals and dreams will be in some way fulfilled. Thus, you are often led to anger, rebellion and escape.

It is within this sense of loneliness, emptiness and mistrust that our Mother Church calls us together here to see how we can be “Members of the Church – Citizens of the World”. At first glance, the dichotomy of this theme contains a certain sense of loneliness. As members of the Church we are called to remain “*in the world but not of the world*”, supposing a sense of separation. Being citizens of the world we now live in, a world of hate, exploitation and opportunism, we cannot but sense feelings of fear, emptiness and disenchantment. Yet, within the dichotomy of the theme of our conference, there is a message of hope and salvation in that it gives us a frame in which we can deal with our loneliness.

Orthodox life, as expressed in its ascetic and liturgical tradition, helps man to confront and deal with his existential emptiness and his loneliness in a creative way. It does not allow us to avoid the loneliness of our human existence. Our role as a Church is to bring man out of his loneliness into a community in which he can fulfill and express his uniqueness within the Truth by way of communion. *We are to be friends with all*, as St. Isaac the Syrian says, *but remain alone*. Isaac continues to tell us, though, that *there has to be a time without response, natural or super-natural. There is a need to have a presence of the world, in which emptiness exists, in order for the world to have a need for God and to seek out Truth*. He says that instead of giving direct solutions to man’s problem, we need to give one the opportunity to take the risk of coming into

one's self, to attempt to come in contact with one's hollowness and with death. To love Truth means to withstand our emptiness and consequently to accept the reality of death.

This can only be cultivated in our chamber (*tameio*) (in our own inner and sacred space) *through silence (hesychia)*. ³This is when one secludes himself in his chamber and comes in touch with his emptiness and the emptiness of this world. Only then can he separate himself from this world. In order to achieve this detachment, one needs to experience suffering without being comforted in absolute human terms. It is then that The *Inexpressible Comfort* descends. When we enter our chamber and live our aloneness, slowly we experience our uniqueness as sons and daughters of God. Then, as Christ, we can say that, even though we are alone in this world, we are not alone because the Father is with us (John 16:13).

If we do *not* remain in the silence of our chamber and accept our aloneness, then our relationships become demanding, insistent and greedy, full of narcissism. We will never experience our uniqueness in the presence of our Creator. We will never be able to accept how much we are truly strangers in this vain and material world. In our solitude, we acquire a sense of our own personal history, within the context of the history of salvation. In this way, we can come to terms with our past and are able to forgive and to love. In the silence of our chamber, we can hear the call toward the Church – the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. Realizing that we are strangers in this world, with a broken and contrite heart, we see the pain of the world around us, yet, we are able to recognize the gifts and talents that have been given to us, the known and unknown, and we turn to thanksgiving and hospitality.

Today we are so entrenched in our misery because we are so attached to the things of this world. We live in so much jealousy and mistrust that we cannot recognize the gifts and talents we have received, and thus we cannot accept the gifts and talents of others. We remain totally on guard, unable to be thankful. Therefore, we do not allow space for Christ to live in us and give us His love, and we are not able to accept and love others. St John Chrysostom says that this is the reason for heresy – not being able to live in the catholicity of His love: “*because*

they did not love their brothers, they were envious of those who prospered, from envy, lust of power was born, and from lust of power was born heresy”.

The meaning of thanksgiving and hospitality is to create space in ourselves so that others can live in us. It is only in this way that our uniqueness can be perfected. In this way, we become Christ-like “*who is offered and in turn offers, who receives and in turn receives*”. By way of hospitality and Eucharist, the estrangement from God and man, from man and his fellowman and from man and himself, is healed. Living a Eucharistic life, we live in the catholicity of His Love, which is diffused throughout the entire universe. In a Eucharistic community, we are able to participate in a way where, together with Him, “*we are broken and shared, broken but not divided, forever consumed and never consumed*”, living in His Holiness. ***Those who refuse to experience this diffusion of love within the communion of the Saints remain alienated and in ultimate loneliness.***

In asking that you live within the dichotomy of being citizens of the world and members of the Church, the Mother Church - the Ecumenical Throne - recognizes the loneliness and difficulties you have as young people. In fact, not only does she recognize this, but she can honestly say that, she too feels as a stranger, suffering the hardships which history has presented, and experiences loneliness in many ways. Knowing that there are no easy ways to heal the pain of loneliness, she invites you to enter the chamber of your heart and to find the uniqueness each of you has as a child of God. She asks that you identify with Christ the Stranger, “*who (as we sing on Holy Friday), from His infancy, as a stranger that he was, lived as a stranger in this world, who knows how to take in the poor and strangers, who was estranged from the world, and who, being a Stranger, had no place whereupon to lay His head.*”

Offering you hospitality, the Mother Church asks you to come out of yourselves into a life of hospitality within the Eucharistic community of the faithful. She wants to reassure you that you are not fully alone, that your Father is near. Hold fast in your faith and cultivate your hope. There will be many groups and communities who will try to entice and promise you with different ways to miraculously alleviate you from your loneliness. You may even

experience loneliness within the realms of the Church and become dismayed. Here, do not forget that the Christian community is a community which remains in expectation. It lives the joy of the Kingdom but is also waiting for the coming of Christ, who will be “everything to every one”. Until we live this reality, no relationship will fulfill us completely. Until we wholly reach the New Jerusalem, we will not be able to avoid the detrition caused by our loneliness, the pain of rejection and separation. But in all of this, Christ assures us in saying: *“These do not fear, they will not conquer you, because as I told you: I will not separate Myself from you. I am near you and do not fear anything.”*⁴

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2nd International Orthodox Youth Conference
Ecumenical Patriarchate
“Members of the Church- Citizens of the World”
July 11-16, 2007

Notes

¹ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, St. Vladimir Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1985, p. 102-103

² T.S. Elliot, “The Hollow Men”, see <http://zachd.com/writing/hollowmen.html>

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, a famous Roman Catholic writer, had developed the movement of silence and solitude throughout his writing. Two books that are especially significant in this development are: *Reaching Out – the three movements of Spiritual Life*, (Doubleday, New York, 1975) and *Out of Solitude – Three meditations of the Christian Life* (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, 1974)

⁴ Romanos Melodos, “*Hymnoi*”, Translation into Modern Greek, Archimndrite Anaias Koustenis, Harmos Publications, Athena, 2003, p. 662-663.