

The Empty Place

This month we celebrate the birth of Christ with a beautiful Ukrainian custom, the “Sviata Vecheria”, or holy Christmas Eve supper. According to tradition we leave an empty place at the table, which reminds us of a few things. The empty place reminds us of loved ones who aren’t with us - our deceased family members, as well as those who are away at school, for work, etc. The empty place is also there in case a stranger or hungry person comes to the door. It reminds us of those who have no one to share the joy of the holiday with, and that we should be ready to welcome them at our table.

Ukrainians believe that no one should be alone on Christmas Eve. The empty place reminds us of what it is to be lonely; to miss the presence of a loved one; to have no one to share a celebration with.

Loneliness is a universal human reality. We all are lonely at one time or another, some more, some less. Not so long ago the vast majority of the people of the world lived in villages where everyone knew everyone else. Today we live in a world where many people live in big cities, go to large universities, or work for immense companies where the individual person is reduced to the status of a number or a body. I’m sure we’ve all had the experience of being lonely in a crowded room. Paradoxically, it’s much easier to be lonely in a city of a million than in a small, isolated village.

The fact that loneliness is common doesn’t make it pleasant, and it can often lead us into temptation. When we’re lonely it’s easy to be drawn into various types of sinful and destructive behavior. Spending hours surfing the internet, especially if this involves looking at pornography or participating in morally questionable “chat-room” conversations; playing computer games for hours on end, especially games which involve “virtual” violence or immorality; hanging out in bars, drinking excessively, using drugs, pre-marital sex, gambling, and many other useless and destructive things are done by people who aren’t necessarily bad human beings, just lonely.

So how should we deal with loneliness? As with any personal need, feeling, or desire, we can address it, ignore it, accept it, or deny it. As with everything else in life, the best path usually consists of accepting the given reality and responding to it in a healthy way.

Everyone needs love. The knowledge that I am loved is probably the most important piece of information that any human being has or needs. When we feel lonely it might be out of a longing to be with people we love, and people who love us. But it might be because we feel abandoned, ignored, or unloved. These are two very different types of loneliness, but the healthy response to both of them is fundamentally the same.

The first step in combating loneliness is to learn to be peaceful within ourselves. Many things can help us cultivate this internal atmosphere of peace, such as prayer, active participation in the spiritual and social life of our parish, being involved in sports, being intellectually engaged, and actively ministering to the needs of others (e.g., volunteering for a social assistance agency, joining a service club, visiting the elderly and infirm, etc.).

It's in our web of relationships that we most effectively free ourselves from loneliness. The most important relationship in our lives is our relationship with God. St. Augustine claimed that God created each and every one of us with an empty place inside ourselves, a space which only God Himself can fill. This is why prayer, worship, the sacramental life, and reading the Bible are so important. If we don't fill this space with God we'll go on being lonely forever, no matter how many friends we've got on Facebook or how many parties we're invited to.

After God, our greatest, deepest, and most fulfilling relationships will be with our spouses and within our families. Though we will definitely experience tension, conflict, and frustration in our families, a healthy relationship with our spouses, parents, siblings, and extended family is absolutely necessary for good mental and spiritual health.

We also need to have strong, loving relationships with close friends, friends we can depend on, friends who are true and devoted. This is very important. We often hear about lonely people getting drawn into chat-rooms or other types of anonymous internet communication, becoming interested in someone sight unseen, arranging to meet the person physically, and ending up being used, abused, abandoned, or worse. Sadly, this kind of thing happens all the time. And it's often the result of self-imposed isolation and loneliness.

This month we'll experience the beautiful custom of the "Holy Supper". The customs and traditions surrounding "*Sviat Vechir*" recognize loneliness as a reality in our life; they remind us of the loneliness we all feel from time to time;

and they help us to address the reality of loneliness in our own lives as well as the lives of our relatives, friends, even strangers.

On Christmas eve, at the vigil service, we sing “God is with us, understand, all ye peoples!” And we sing these words, as we should, together. Both our folk customs and our Church hymns remind us that the cure for loneliness is found in God, and in each other.

Which is something worth remembering the rest of the year as well.

Fr. Bohdan Hladio
January 2013