

Close-up

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Faith and solitude

What does it really mean to be “alone”? And how can we live that “finite infinity” that all of us are? An exploration of the deepest needs of each of us and the response given by Christianity. A talk from the president of CL at the “Solitude, the Enemy,” conference for the National Day Against Solitude. (Florence, November 16, 2019)



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Solitude is a phenomenon with many facets, something which I am sure will be expertly addressed during the course of this conference. The very definition of solitude that appears in the program attests to the large range of meanings the word may take on: solitude is “defined as the subjective sensation of a lack of support in one’s moment of need. [...] Solitude [...] has a negative influence on one’s health” (from the website nemicasolitudine2019.com). Yet, as well as these statements capture the phenomenon, the question of the nature of the need and the lack that cause solitude remains open.

This brings to mind some verses from the poet Mario Luzi:

*“What is this lack a lack of
o heart,
of which all of a sudden you are full?
Of what? Once the dam is broken
it floods and submerges you
the inundation of your poverty..
It comes,
perhaps it comes,
from beyond you
a recall
which you now do not listen to because you are in agony.
But it exists, fostered by strength and music
the perpetual music will return.
Be calm.”*

(Under Human Species, Green Integer, Los Angeles, 2010).

The question posed by the poet only magnifies the urgency of fully comprehending the nature of solitude. In the context of this conference, which seeks to offer, as you can read in the program, “a comprehensive view of the principal causes behind the solitude of people of all ages, in particular those of advanced years,” I was asked to speak about “faith and solitude.” To



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highlight the contribution that faith can make, however, we first need to more precisely identify that which constitutes human solitude, a phenomenon that is most dramatic for the aging.

1. Solitude: at the heart of every serious commitment to our humanity

Solitude is one of the elementary experiences of being human. The poetic genius of Giacomo Leopardi documents this in an incomparable manner in his “Night Song of a Nomadic Shepherd in Asia”:

*“And when I gaze upon you,
Who mutely stand above the desert plains
Which heaven with its far circle but confines, [...] Or watch the stars that shine there in the sky,
Musing, I say within me:
Wherefore those many lights,
That boundless atmosphere,
And infinite calm sky? And what the meaning
Of this vast solitude? And what am I?”*

(“Night Song of a Nomadic Shepherd in Asia,” vv. 79-89, in *Selected Prose and Poetry*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966, p. 275).

Gazing at the moon and everything in the heavens that points to the vast expanse of the cosmos, the wandering shepherd cannot help but ask the question that burns inside us: “I say within me: [...] what [is] the meaning of this vast solitude?” And immediately the question about the meaning of that cosmic, vast solitude brings the poet to ask himself about human nature: “And what am I?” Leopardi intuits that the immense solitude of the moon, the stars, the sky, and the heavens has to do with his humanity, his solitude. The first implicates the second, becoming an image in nature of the human solitude that gives it meaning. Only humans can be aware of solitude. In that sense, the “I” is the self-awareness of the cosmos. Emily Dickinson clearly captures the difference between the solitude experienced by the human person and that of the natural world, which lacks consciousness:

*“There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself—
Finite infinity.”*

(*The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1924, p. 27).

No solitude can compare to that felt by the soul when faced with itself. That experience reveals something we find inside our very structure: finite infinity. It seems like a contradiction in terms, but that is precisely the paradox of humanity.

Consequently, the more a man becomes aware of himself, the more he comes to see the nature of the solitude he experiences. “The more we discover our needs, the more we become aware that we cannot resolve them on our own. Nor can others, people like us. A sense of powerlessness accompanies every serious experience in our lives. This sense of *powerlessness* generates *solitude*. True solitude does not come from being physically alone but from the discovery that a fundamental problem of ours cannot find its solution in us or in others. We can well say that the sense of solitude is borne in the very heart of every serious commitment to our own humanity. Those who believe they have found the solution to a great need of theirs in something or someone, only to have this something or someone disappear or prove incapable of resolving this need, can understand this. We are alone in our needs, in our need to be and to live intensely” (L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2006, p. 55). The more a man is aware of the boundless dimensions of his desire, and his equally boundless powerlessness to answer it, the more he feels this solitude: the central problem of life cannot find its solution in

us or in others. It is a solitude we often try to escape because it is hard to live with: “Gradually I have come to see daylight,” Nietzsche writes, “in the general deficiency of our culture and education: nobody learns, nobody strives after, nobody teaches—*how to endure solitude*” (F. Nietzsche, [443] “On Education,” Fifth Book, in *The Dawn of Day*, Macmillan, New York, 1903, p. 313).

2. Solitude: enemy or friend?

The title of this conference seems to suggest that, to the question about the nature of solitude, an answer can be given at the outset: “Solitude, the Enemy.” But the fact that there was a desire to propose the theme hints that there is still space to conceive of it in another way. Let us, then, ask: Is it possible not to suffer solitude as an enemy?

Finding oneself alone is a powerful provocation for all of us—it puts our backs to the wall, forcing us to come to terms with ourselves by posing a radical challenge to our reason and freedom. Depending on the way we live, solitude can be either a condemnation or a victory. This means it is a fork in the road, an open drama.

For the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, rejecting solitude may involve a grave loss: “Running away from *loneliness*, you drop your chance of *solitude* on the way: of that sublime condition in which one can ‘gather thoughts’, ponder, reflect, create—and so, in the last account, give meaning and substance to communication” (44 *Letters From the Liquid Modern World*, Polity, Cambridge, 2010, p. 8). In that light, solitude

appears to be anything but an enemy. “Solitude is not at all a fool’s errand, it is indispensable if you want to be good company,” say the lyrics of a song by Giorgio Gaber (“Solitude - 1976,” from the album *Libertà Obbligatoria* [Obligatory freedom], Carosello, 1976).

Others, in contrast, perceive the opposite. One of the most touching literary expressions of this negative experience of solitude is that offered by Giovanni Pascoli in his poem “Two Orphans,” in which he poignantly describes a dialogue between two brothers after the death of their mother, in the evening while they are in bed:

“Now nothing comforts us,
and we are alone in the dark night.’
‘She was once there, behind that door;
And you heard a passing whisper
Every so often.’ ‘And now Momma
is dead.’
‘Remember? Then we weren’t in peace
so much, between us...’ ‘Now we are
better...’
‘Now that there is no one to be pleased
with us...’
‘and no one who forgives us’”
(*Poesie*, Garzanti, Milan, 1994, pp.
354–55).

Victory or condemnation: they are two different, contrasting ways of living solitude. Ety Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who died at Auschwitz, testifies to this in a brilliant way: “I know two sorts of loneliness. One makes me feel dreadfully unhappy, lost and forlorn, the other makes me feel strong and happy. The first always appears when I feel out of touch with my fellow men, with everything, when I am com-

pletely cut off from others and from myself and can see no purpose in life or any connection between things, nor have the slightest idea where I fit in. With the other kinds of loneliness, by contrast, I feel very strong and certain and connected with everyone and everything and with God, and realize that I can manage on my own and that I am not dependent on others. Then I know that I am part of a meaningful whole and that I can impart a great deal of strength to others" (*Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2002, p. 82). What makes the difference, therefore, between the two different kinds of loneliness is not whether one is alone or in a crowd, but whether one lives a life full of meaning or not.

The psychiatrist Eugenio Borgna, who for his entire life faced the drama of the kind of solitude caused by mental illness, helps us to identify what is at stake in the difference between the two forms of solitude: "Solitude and isolation are two radically different ways of life, despite the fact they are often equated. Being alone does not mean feeling alone, but rather temporarily separating oneself from the world of persons and things, from daily concerns, to enter into one's own interiority and imagination—without losing the desire and longing for relationships with others: with loved ones and with the tasks life has entrusted to us. We are isolated, instead, when we close in on ourselves, either because other people reject us or, more often, dragged by our own indifference, by a gloomy selfishness that is the effect of an arid or withered heart" ("La solitudine come rifugio ai tempi del social network" [Solitude, a refuge in the age of social networks], interview by Luciana Sica, *la Repubblica*, January 18, 2011).

That is to say, these two mind-sets are not automatically imposed in human life, as if a person could do nothing. In every human act, freedom is always at play. Consequently, a person chooses to either "be alone," in other words to temporarily separate from people and things in order to discover the meaning of himself, or to "isolate oneself," closing in on oneself because there is nothing outside of oneself to discover.

A person, then, is not condemned to live solitude in an enclosure, without ties to anything or anyone, no matter the situation in which one finds oneself, with all one's wounds and "cracks," as a well-known author attests in her article entitled, in English, "The Crack Inside Me": "Since my adolescence, and maybe even before that, I always had the sense that I was born with something wrong with me. Something that didn't work like it should, as if I were a house and that defect was a deep crack in a weight-bearing wall. [...] It was that malaise described by one of Montale's poems: 'It was the strangled rivulet gurgling, it was the shriveling of parched leaves, it was the horse falling heavily.' We studied it at school, but no one in the class asked if it might be talking about us. As a girl, I'd look at myself in the mirror in the morning, smile, think of that crack inside and say to myself, 'go on, what are you worried about? You're young, you're beautiful.' However, as I grew older, the crack seemed to get deeper, a black mark on the white wall inside me. It grew wider, into a melancholy that became a disease: severe depression. I

would go to doctors, they'd treat me, and I'd feel better, but then intermittently that crack would show up again, painfully, whispering, 'You're not healed' [...]. I read Mounier, who wrote, 'God enters through our wounds.' I thought about it: was that crack a hole in an otherwise impermeable wall, a necessary wound? [...] Why this wound? Without it, I who am physically healthy, well-off, and quite fortunate would not need anything. My salvation is that broken wall, that fissure in the dam: through it, a gush of uninhibited grace can enter, making fertile what was dry and hardened" (M. Corradi, "La mia crepa" [The crack inside me], *Tempi*, October 19, 2017, p. 46). This is the dramatic tension, the struggle Etty Hillesum describes: "Yes, we carry everything within us, God and Heaven and Hell and Earth and Life and Death and all of history. The externals are simply so many props; everything we need is within us. And we have to take everything that comes: the bad with the good, which does not mean we cannot devote our life to curing the bad. But we must know what motives inspire our struggle, and we must begin with ourselves, every day anew" (*Letters and Diaries*, p. 463).

What could motivate us to take on this struggle? Only a love for ourselves. In fact, even the deepest suffering can bring us to discover horizons that were absolutely unknown before that suffering; but to be open to that possibility, you have to look at suffering with that positive openness that defines the nature of human freedom at its depths: "Suffering at the level of one's soul," Borgna writes, "is an experience that is part



of life, and one that cannot be considered as merely the result of a pathology.” Suffering at the level of the soul is rooted in human experience and cannot be reduced to any pathology. “Even in depression and anxiety, [...] suffering loses none of its dignity. [...] It drastically broadens our inclinations toward introspection, toward the search for deeper interior experiences” (E. Borgna, *La solitudine dell'anima* [The solitude of the soul], Feltrinelli, Milan, 2013, p. 51). We return to Hillesum, who confirms this: “If all this suffering does not help us to broaden our horizon, to attain a greater humanity by shedding all trifling and irrelevant issues, then it will all have been for nothing” (*Letters and Diaries*, p. 502).

This, then, is the true nature of the loneliness that isolates us: “Solitude, in fact, does not signify to be alone, but the absence of meaning” (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queens, Montreal, 1997, p. 85). A person does not feel alone because he is alone, but because the meaning that gives perspective and substance to every instant, that binds us to others and to things, is missing.

And it seems to me that this lack of meaning is the most widespread marker of life today, as Umberto Galimberti recognizes: “In 1979 when I began working as a psychoanalyst, the problems were grounded in emotions, feelings, and sexuality. Now they concern the void of meaning.” This does not just apply to a particular age group. You can already live “old age at twenty years old”; and, in fact, “Young people today are not well, but they do not even understand why. They lack purpose” (U. Galimberti, “A 18 anni via da casa: ci vuole un servizio civile di 12 mesi” [Out of the house at 18: what’s needed is 12 months of civil service], interview by S. Lorenzetto, *Corriere della Sera*, September 15, 2019).

Teilhard de Chardin predicted this over 60 years ago: “The greatest danger which today’s humanity need fear is not a catastrophe which comes from out there somewhere, a stellar catastrophe, neither is it famine, nor even disease; rather it is spiritual malady, which is the most terrible malady because the most directly human among the scourges is to remain ‘without the taste for life’” (*The Phenomenon of Man*, Harper & Row, New York,

1959, pp. 230–31). This loss makes a person increasingly fragile within the context of society, and the bitter fruit of that vulnerability is living alienated from oneself and from others; in other words, isolated despite being surrounded by people.

3. Solitude, the place to discover our original companionship

There is yet another kind of solitude, the one that prompted the Latin expression that is attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “*O beata solitudo, o sola beatitudo*” [O happy solitude, O sole happiness]. This is the opposite of isolation. If we do not stifle the need for meaning that, in any case, always remains inside the human heart, and instead look at it in its entirety, it will lead us to discover deep within ourselves a “companionship more original to us than our solitude.” The need for a reason to live is, in fact, “not generated by my own will; it is given to me.” That need is an essential part of our “I” but we do not produce it; it comes from outside. Therefore, “before solitude there is companionship, which embraces my solitude. Because of this, solitude is no longer true solitude, but a crying out to that hidden companionship” (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, p. 56).

What is this “hidden companionship?” How can we discover it? “To be conscious of oneself right to the core is to perceive, at the depths of the self, an Other. [...] The ‘I,’ the human being, is that level of nature in which nature becomes aware of not being made by itself. In this way, the entire cosmos is like the continuation of my body. [...] I am because I am made. [...] So I do not conscious-

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ly say ‘I am,’ in a sense that captures my entire stature as a human being if I do not mean ‘I am made’” (ibid., p. 106).

Etty Hillesum testifies to this in a powerful way in her *Diaries*: “There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there, too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then He must be dug out again” (*Letters and Diary*, p. 91). She later adds, “If, after a long and arduous process, day in, day out, you manage to come to grips with your inner sources, with God, in short, and if only you make certain that your path to God is unblocked—which you can do by ‘working on yourself’—then you can keep renewing yourself at these inner sources and never again be afraid of wasting your strength” (ibid., p. 535).

It is a matter, then, of acknowledging and living one’s relationship with the Other—with God, the infinite—a relationship that is within the reach of everyone, no matter his or her circumstances. Borgna affirms this: “Even when we are alone [...] it is possible for us to listen to the infinite inside of us. [...] The infinite, that secret dimension of life, is inside us: alive and throbbing; and cannot be erased except to the degree we let ourselves be enticed and devoured by the noise and tumult outside” (*La solitudine dell’anima*, p. 24). This Other, this infinite, can only be reached by those who fully engage with the depths of themselves, without letting themselves be devoured by distraction.

“Life, then, expresses itself, first of all, as consciousness of the relationship with he who made it [...]. Only in the discovery of Being as love which gives of Itself continually [making me right now] is solitude eliminated.” There is an Other who wants me to exist, for whom my existence is precious, and thanks to whom I am never alone. Therefore, “Existence is realized, in substance, as dialogue with the Great Presence which constitutes it—it is an inseparable

companion. The company is *in* our ‘I.’ There is nothing we do by ourselves [because we are generated in every instant by an Other]. Every human friendship [every attempt to find an answer to that solitude] is the reversion of the original structure of being [in other words, of the original companionship an Other offers by giving us life right now], and if this is denied, its truth is in jeopardy” (L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, McGill-Queens, Montreal, 1998, p. 90).

To explain this, Fr. Giussani uses an analogy: “True self-consciousness is well portrayed by the baby in the arms of his mother and father—supported like this, he can enter any situation whatsoever, profoundly tranquil, with a promise of peace and joy. No curative system can claim this, without mutilating the person. Often, in order to excise the censure of certain wounds we end up censoring our humanity” (*The Religious Sense*, p. 106–7), with the result of making life even more painfully dramatic.

Despite the possibility of discovering this companionship within us, which is open to everyone, man is so fragile that he often remains a prisoner to circumstances and asks himself, “Who will deliver me from this mortal situation?” In fact, even “in today’s world, so devoid of presence, in which man is so solitary, [...] so alone and therefore so likely to yield (he is as fragile as a child, but it is repugnant because he is no longer a child, he is an ‘adult child,’ prey to whomever gets to him first, grabs him first; incapable of cultivating critical judgment, of using the categories of ‘better’ or

‘not as good’); in a world in which man is so enslaved to those who, by whatever means, appear stronger than he; in this world, deep down, the expectation and waiting for salvation is still intact” (L. Giussani, *In cammino* [On the journey]: 1992–1998, BUR, Milan, 2014, p. 43).

That expectation and waiting finds the widest variety of expressions and persists despite today’s widespread nihilism. One emblematic case is that of the French novelist Michel Houellebecq, who identifies the need for salvation with the desire to be loved; in other words, to not be alone. It is an ineradicable desire deeply woven into every human being, even an ardent nonbeliever like Houellebecq. In a public letter to Bernard-Henri Lévy, he describes that indestructible expectation, saying, “More and more frequently, and it pains me to admit it, I felt a desire to be loved. On each occasion a little thought convinced me of the absurdity of this dream. Life is limited and forgiveness, impossible. But thought was powerless, the desire persisted—and, I have to admit, persists to this day” (F. Sinisi, “Michel Houellebecq: ‘La vita è rara,’” book review, *Tracce*, n. 6/2019, p. 65). You see how irreducible humanity is: the desire to be loved persists, and our experience continually attests to this.

4. Solitude can only be overcome by a presence

With that, we return to Leopardi and the “vast solitude” of the nomadic shepherd in Asia, the metaphor for the person walking a jour-

ney. For two thousand years, that person—who is each one of us—has been reached by an announcement: that God, the origin of all that exists, became man. What that “infinite calm” and “boundless atmosphere” point to is “God made man.” And “when you discover that the value of all things is the Word incarnate [...] the calm and deep black of the sky [...] become rich and beautiful. You look at them more with greater peace, for example, because you know where you will end up with them; you know they will not be taken away, that you will enjoy them forever” (L. Giussani, *Affezione e dimora* [Affection and place], BUR, Milan, 2001, pp. 413–14).

This is an experience Fr. Giussani had firsthand, so he is a trustworthy witness for anyone who finds him- or herself experiencing solitude. In his last interview with *Corriere della Sera*, on the day of his 82nd birthday (October 15, 2004), just a few months before he died, he summarized, in a way, the trajectory of his long life, saying, “Today, man is living a sort of existential dyspepsia, an alteration of his elementary functions, which divides him. [...] To the brutal loneliness to which man calls himself, as if to save himself from an earthquake, Christianity is offered as an answer. The Christian finds a positive answer [to this existential situation] in the fact that God has become man; this is the event that surprises and comforts what would otherwise be a misfortune. And God cannot conceive of his own actions toward man if not as a ‘generous challenge’ to his freedom.” God does not impose



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upon men and women, but rather waits to be freely welcomed. Therefore, “the modern objection that Christianity and the Church reduce man’s freedom is nullified by the adventure of God’s relationship with man. Whereas, because of a limited idea of freedom, it is inconceivable for man today that God should involve himself in such a narrow relationship as that with man, almost denying Himself. This is the tragedy: man seems increasingly more concerned with affirming his own freedom than with acknowledging God’s magnanimity, the one thing that determines the measure of man’s participation in reality and thus truly frees him” (“God’s Commitment with Man’s Brutal Loneliness,” interview by Gian Guido Vecchi, published in *Traces*, November 2004).

A presence. That is the greatest challenge to human reason and freedom, and the answer to the search for meaning—a presence that offers true companionship to the person aware of the powerlessness that constitutes him. “I have loved you with an everlasting love, because I have drawn you to me, having pity on your nothingness” (cf. *Jer* 31:3). God was so moved by the nothingness we are, by the solitude we do not know how to conquer through our own efforts, that He sent His Son into the world. And, like the Father, Jesus, too had infinite pity on those who ran

into Him in the course of their lives. There is an episode in the Gospel that describes that living compassion: Jesus is walking through the fields with His disciples when he sees a procession. It is the funeral for the only son of a widow. He draws near to her and says, “Do not weep” (*Lk* 7:11–17). Who knows how she must have felt in that embrace that exceeded every human emotion and restored her hope! That death was not the end of everything; that widowed mother was not condemned to be left alone because the seed of the resurrection was present in that man who spoke those unimaginable words to her and immediately afterward gave her back her son, alive. So then, suffering—which often isolates us and pulls apart relationships, even the closest ones—is no longer a roadblock but a “problem,” as C.S. Lewis writes: “In a sense, [Christianity] creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving” (*The Problem of Pain*, Harper Collins, New York, 2015, p. 14). That great expert of the human drama, Paul Claudel, observes, “One question constantly presents itself in the soul of one who is sick [it also applies to a person feeling solitude]: ‘Why? Why me? Why do I have to suffer?’ [...]”

The only one capable of responding to that terrible question, the oldest question of Humanity, which Job provided the almost official and liturgical form of, was God, who was directly addressed and called upon. The question was so immense that only the Word could address it, providing not an explanation, but a presence, according to those words of the Gospel: 'I have not come to explain, to disperse doubts with an explanation, but to fill, or better, to replace the very need for an explanation with my presence.' The Son of God did not come to destroy suffering, but rather to suffer with us" (*Toi, qui es-tu?* Gallimard, Paris, 1936, pp. 112–13; translation ours). In other words, He came into the world to accompany us as we suffer; He came to keep man company in all the situations in which he finds himself. In that sense, faith offers this contribution to resolving the human problem: placing the person in the optimal conditions to seek an answer to that solitude that, as we recalled at the beginning, "is borne in the very heart of every serious commitment to our own humanity." To the question of the nomadic shepherd, Christianity responds with a presence that accompanies man within the concreteness of his existence. Is not a presence what we need to be able to face our daily toil without fear? Is this not what people who are aging and alone need? "Getting older [...] you become more solitary, but with solitude you are increasingly aware of what dominates all that surrounds us, the heavens and the earth. It is what my poor mother said to me, going to Mass early in the

morning, at 5:30, one day at the end of winter when spring was already coming. I was five years old and was trailing behind her; she walking at a brisk pace. In the total serenity of morning, with a single star left in the sky, [...] she said to me [...]: 'How beautiful the world is and how great God is.' [...] It is irrational to think of contingent realities, in which nothing makes itself, without bringing in that mysterious thing from which everything flows, from which everything draws its being. 'How beautiful the world is and, *therefore*, how great the One who is making it!'" (L. Giussani, *Avvenimento di libertà* [Event of freedom], Marietti 1820, Genoa, 2002, p. 14).

For a person who is self-aware, solitude can be a daily companion, a friend, because it is full of that uninterrupted dialogue with the mystery that makes all things and that became man, remaining present in history through a human reality made up of men and women who are the sign of that presence. This is the contribution faith offers—not to tolerate suffering, but to accept it and live it, as challenging and painful as that is, in the awareness that someone is present who has forged an unbreakable alliance with our heart, and for whom we are precious, just as we are. Pope Francis described solitude as "the drama [...] experienced by countless men and women. I think of the elderly, abandoned even by their loved ones and children; widows and widowers; the many men and women left by their spouses; all those who feel alone, misunderstood and un-

heard; migrants and refugees fleeing from war and persecution; and those many young people who are victims of the culture of consumerism, the culture of waste, the throwaway culture" ("Homily for the Holy Mass for the Opening of the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops," October 4, 2015).

A cry rises up from all of this wounded humanity, calling each of us to a responsibility. Think how many people are alone because no one gazes upon them, no one says to them, "You have a value. Just as you are, you are worth more than the entire universe!" That is the witness of the many people who dedicate their lives to the aging through a myriad of initiatives—and all of you are a striking example—fighting against what the pope calls the "throwaway culture." People with an outlook that knows how to highlight the rich legacy of life offered by the aging and keep them company on the last leg of their journey offer a crucial contribution in responding to the lack of meaning at the origin of that solitude—the form that is an enemy—to which more and more men and women, young and old, are condemned today: those cast aside because they are considered useless. No one is useless. Every person has an immeasurable value, as the Gospel reminds us: "What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life?" (*Mt 16:26*). Can you imagine a fuller affirmation of the absolute dignity of every single person, or a more ennobling gaze upon humanity? ■