

• November 21, 1984 •

A supplement to Catholic newspapers, published by the National Catholic News Service, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. All contents copyright © 1984 by NC News Service.

Faith Today

Up from isolation

By Father Herbert Weber
NC News Service

"You're not very good at visiting, are you? Don't come again unless you can give better answers."

Those statements came from a homebound, arthritis-racked parishioner. I was the visitor.

My house call was not unusual. The woman had been recommended to the church as someone who seldom had an opportunity to talk with others. Her statement of dissatisfaction with me came after a half hour of her asking why God allows good people to suffer and my struggling to find an adequate answer.

A week later I happened to visit the same woman in the hospital. With a twinkle in her eye, she said that she knew she had given me a rough time earlier. She went on to explain that at the time she just could not afford to let herself believe that someone would actually care about her.

Her affront had been a means of testing my sincerity.

□ □ □

It is a sad indictment on our world to say that there are some who can't believe others would really care. For these people, isolation becomes a way of life.

Moreover, such isolation is not confined to the elderly or the

homebound. As I see it, isolation is the all-pervasive human experience of our times. It can be found intertwined with any variety of social concerns.

•A woman caught in the clutches of domestic violence indicated she remained in her home because there was nowhere else to go.

•A college student feeling at odds with his roommate noted that there was no one there when he needed advice.

•A factory worker admitted he started stopping at the bar after work because he wanted someone to show him some attention, even if it was only the bartender.

Isolation happens when someone starts to become disconnected from others. The person may or may not know this is happening.

It can be associated with a fragmented life where work, socializing, education, family and religious experiences are all separated from each other. It may be present when relationships with special persons lose their life-giving ability.

Isolation often is connected with tragic experiences where the bottom falls out and those involved look in vain for support systems. Interestingly, people often receive considerable compassion from others during

life's biggest struggles. Yet this show of concern may be passing, and isolation follows after the immediate crisis is over.

Some encounters with isolation are temporary and of minor consequence. Others become crises.

A manager, facing a layoff from the firm that had employed him for 29 years, was devastated. Because of the turmoil of his situation, he could no longer concentrate on his church or community activities, or even on his family life. His solution was to withdraw from them, but that caused even greater isolation.

□ □ □

Far too often isolation becomes a way of life and men and women learn to lead lives where they remain out of touch with others. It is not uncommon to discover these persons casting a lot of blame at the world, entering into hostile situations or moods of depression.

Agencies and church groups re-

spond to many social problems by creating programs and activities. Occasionally such efforts may work in overcoming the experience of isolation. But, in my experience, something more fundamental is required.

The need created by isolation is so personal and individualistic that the best response a compassionate community can make is a personal and individualistic expression of care and concern. There has to be a one-on-one opportunity for listening and sharing.

Sometimes, as I discovered, those who respond may receive insults and be turned away as "poor visitors."

If they pass the test, however, then they will have a unique opportunity for building bridges. They are the ones who can invite others out of isolation into affiliation with people who care.

(Father Weber is a pastor and author in Bowling Green, Ohio.)

Far too many lives are spent in solitude and spiritual seclusion, writes Father Herbert Weber. There is a great need, he says, to build bridges to draw people out of their loneliness.

