

# Catholic

## UPDATE

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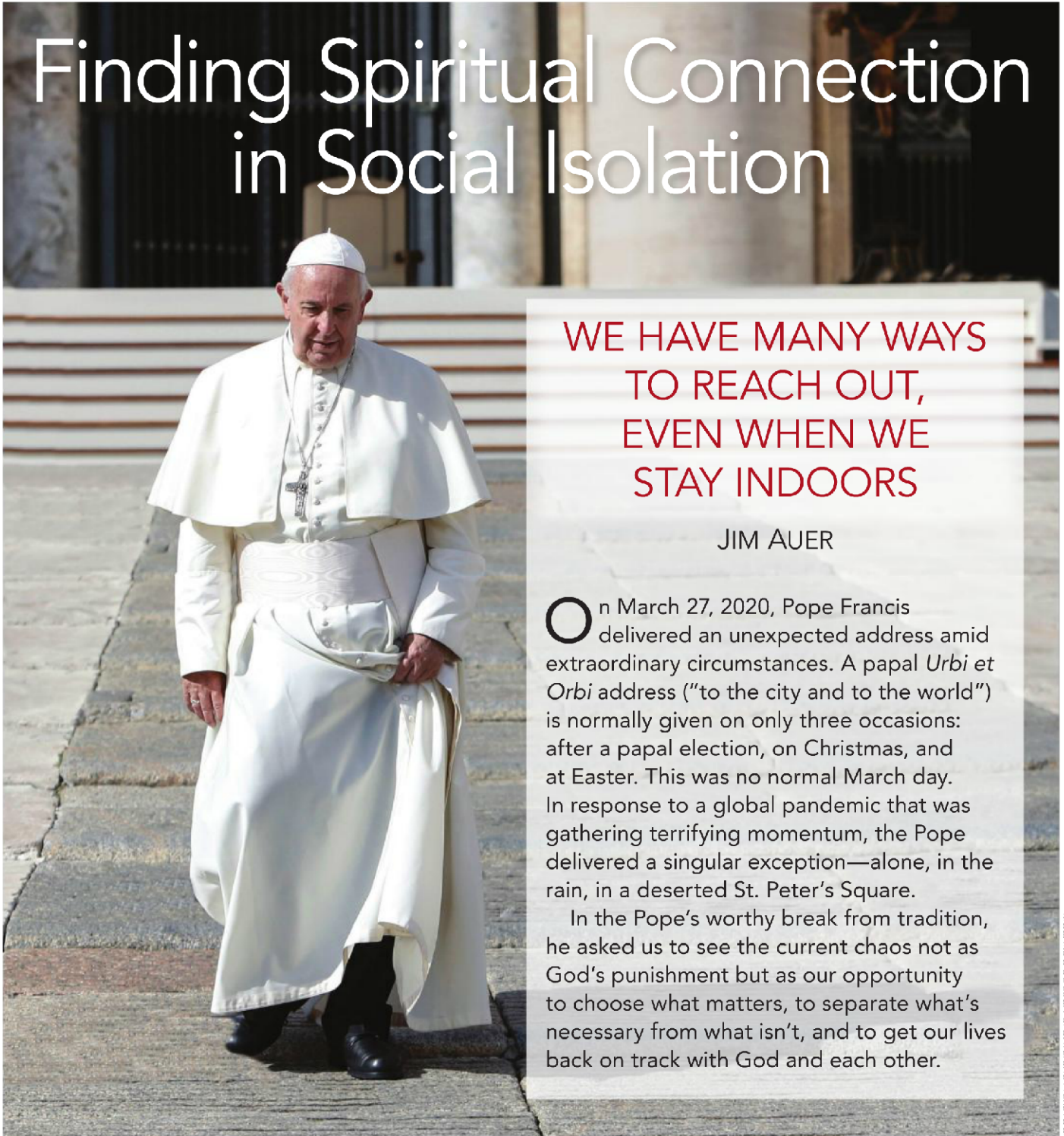
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## Finding Spiritual Connection in Social Isolation



WE HAVE MANY WAYS  
TO REACH OUT,  
EVEN WHEN WE  
STAY INDOORS

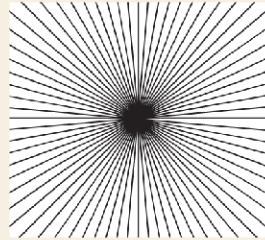
JIM AUER

On March 27, 2020, Pope Francis delivered an unexpected address amid extraordinary circumstances. A papal *Urbi et Orbi* address (“to the city and to the world”) is normally given on only three occasions: after a papal election, on Christmas, and at Easter. This was no normal March day. In response to a global pandemic that was gathering terrifying momentum, the Pope delivered a singular exception—alone, in the rain, in a deserted St. Peter’s Square.

In the Pope’s worthy break from tradition, he asked us to see the current chaos not as God’s punishment but as our opportunity to choose what matters, to separate what’s necessary from what isn’t, and to get our lives back on track with God and each other.

RICCARDO DE LUCA/UPDAT/SHUTTERSTOCK

According to Merriam-Webster, “social distancing” first appeared in 2003, though few paid much attention until the coronavirus crisis that went global in 2020. How do we fulfill Jesus’ mandate of love in a climate where, to be safe, we stand at least six feet away from each other? How do we bond spiritually in ways that benefit others and ourselves? And how can our connections bring us closer to God? In a diagram, connectedness might look like this: the closer the lines come to the center, the closer they are to each other. God is the center; we are the lines. How do we connect? Let’s count some ways.



### **Don’t Waste a Crisis**

Though COVID-19 and the virus that causes the disease may be at the forefront of our minds, it’s important to remember that it doesn’t take a pandemic to place individuals in isolation. Consider those who are removed due to a long-term illness, limited transportation, or other social and economic hardships. We shouldn’t waste a crisis. We shouldn’t emerge from it unchanged, with our attitudes, outlook, daily practices—indeed, our spiritual lives—no different than they were at the onset. How many similar possibilities remain undone—worldwide and in each of our lives?

Take this phone conversation as an example:

“Hi, Grandma! This is Erin.”

“Erin! What a nice surprise! I haven’t heard from you in... never mind, it doesn’t matter. How are you, sweetie?”

“I’m fine, Grandma. I’m calling to see how you are. This is awful, isn’t it—this pandemic thing? Did anything like this happen back....?”

“Way back in my time?” her grandmother replied with a chuckle.

The unexpected chat continued for just twenty minutes. But at its conclusion, the elder woman’s day was brighter, her loneliness lighter. The child felt loved and joined again to her grandmother. The geographical distance between the two felt shorter. A phone call. A short, simple, yet powerful gesture.

### **Thanks to Unforeseen Opportunities**

“Thanks for calling Bridgetown Hardware. How can I help you?”

“Hi, this is Tom Emerson of Emerson Construction. Get a pencil and paper. I need to place a sizable order for sheetrock, fiberglass tape, taping compound, caulk....”

Normally, Tom never would have thought of ordering supplies from a small, neighborhood hardware store for a commercial building project. But he had read a newspaper pitch urging support for struggling small businesses through the current economic crisis. Emerson’s order helped

Bridgetown Hardware stay in business and make payroll another month.

### **Thanks to an Illness**

“Harry...it’s...Leon.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake....I’m just leaving my chemo treatment; I didn’t think the day could get any worse, but then of all people, you—”

“I was wrong, Harry. You know what I’m talking about. I was wrong. I wanted you to hear me say it before...anything happens.”

Estrangement melted more easily than either brother ever dreamed it could. Not that they had dreamed of it happening much. Nevertheless, it did.

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“Grandma” had been lonely before the global pandemic. “Bridgetown Hardware” had been struggling before the economic crisis crippled the economy. The “brothers” had been estranged for years before the diagnosis of a terminal illness. Those vignettes are fictional, but real ones like them take place in communities all over the world every day.

### **Embracing the Divine Mandate**

Not being in the presence of others seemingly runs contrary to human nature because we are hardwired to want to connect with others.

This inclination is more than a psychological instinct. God, who made it a divine mandate, placed it within us. Even though we may make a mess of our connections by associating for selfish reasons, failing to show respect, or selectively ignoring others when it’s convenient, we are meant to be gifts and pillars of support to one another. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). If we asked Jesus today, as did one of the scribes while he walked the earth, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus might well answer, “Who isn’t?”

In Matthew’s judgment scene (Matthew 25:31–46), those who are rejected ask, “Why...when did we...?” All of their offenses are connected to cases of not reaching out to others in need. Jesus knew we commit sins of omission and identified himself with those whose needs had been ignored: “I was hungry and you” did nothing.

Geographical distance between people is not the huge impediment we think it is. If I’m six feet from a hurting person, I can’t give that person a hug, and these days maybe I shouldn’t.

But a smile, a listening ear, some gentle, wise advice, and words of encouragement are all at our disposal. Even if that



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

“We should reflect and pray over the experience to find meaning for us now and in the future.”

—LUIS CARDINAL TAGLE OF THE PHILIPPINES



person is hundreds or thousands of miles away, it's still not difficult. We are blessed in this age with multiple means of communication that virtually erase the distance.

"We shall never know all the good that a simple smile can do," St. Teresa of Calcutta often said. We can smile over the phone, in a note or a letter, on a card, or with a surprise gift. The granddaddy of motivational speakers, Leo Buscaglia, said, "Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring—all of which have the potential to turn a life around."

A cynical "little voice" inside our heads may scoff at the idea. "Seriously—what good can that do?" The little voice should be attributed to the Father of Lies who loves to wrap spiritual poison in enticing, glittery paper and opportunities to do well in grimy, wrinkled parchment imprinted with, "Stupid. Futile. Waste of time. Do not open. Ignore." The Liar intimidates to induce the conclusion that doing nothing is the only sensible course of action.

### **Making Opportunities Out of Obstacles**

As we ignore the Liar and contemplate ways to become and stay spiritually connected in spite of social isolation, let's avoid the mistake of branding isolation as a bad guy across the board. Life is filled with things that can be good in some circumstances, neutral in others, and toxic in still others. Isolation can be all three.

Prisoners in extended solitary confinement often emerge

with their minds and spirits broken. Yet the Desert Fathers and Mothers (early monks and nuns who lived principally alone in the wilderness) lived joyful lives. Much of the most soaring poetry by St. John of the Cross was written during his harsh imprisonment and isolation.



If we must live through a period of relative isolation, we have a choice of resenting it or accepting and making peace with it. If we choose the latter, we stand a better chance of making the most of it. If we use it to get back on track with God and others, as Pope Francis urges, it can be a source of serenity and joy.

Isolation doesn't mean shutting others out. Those who live the Carmelite vocation and similar cloistered spiritual paths aren't trying to get away from people and become really holy. An aspirant with that mindset will not last and most likely will be gently but firmly advised to choose a different path. Contemplatives live for others just as much as do missionaries who often labor in settings of poverty and oppression.

A degree of isolation is an opportunity to enter a mini-monastery, a virtual cloister. A retreat is a good example. The aim is not to tune others out but to make ourselves better able to serve them through prayer and other practices, even while we're separated from them by distance.

Time spent alone gives us a chance to revisit and renew active participation in a particularly glorious tenet of



## **Am I Responsible, or Is It "They Versus Us?"**

**W**e're easily intimidated by the scope or complexity of human problems. When we encounter an enormous need, we assume only an enormous entity can do something about it. Hence, it belongs to the government, or to the ever popular invisible "they." We've all been privy to a conversation that relates to this mindset: "Isn't it awful how 'they' have been failing to fix things for centuries upon centuries? They ought to do something about that."

Decades ago, the daily newspaper comic strip featuring the amiable, philosophical opossum named Pogo stated incisively, "We have met the enemy and he is us." When we say "they" as an alternate group that should help address a need, we should consider that we are "they" or "they" are us! Ask yourself, *How can I help?*

our faith: the Mystical Body of Christ. Theology crossing dimensions of existence names it the communion of saints. We don't need to establish connections with others from scratch. Connections with people we know and ones we don't are already in place. We're connected with people who haven't been born yet and people whose names are in history books and dusty courthouse registers. The communion of saints spans even distances created by time.

### Finding Spiritual Connectedness

We're connected to people here on earth and people "over there." An out-of-nowhere note of thanks or a phone call would delight a grandpa who's still with us. And a grandma who has passed on to the next life isn't likely to have abandoned all thoughts of her loved ones—or all desire to help them—simply because she left her earthly body and recipe box behind.

Social isolation does not cut us off from others. Failure to believe in our spiritual connectedness does. Failure to accept our obligations to each other does. Feeling disempowered by geographical distance—when we really aren't—does.



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Distance caused not by geography but by differences that have become adversarial is especially tragic. People with militantly opposite ideologies, for example, can sit three feet apart but feel light years from each other. Most differences have a multipronged effect—they can be divisive or enriching. The outcome primarily depends on the attitudes of the people involved. It's worth making an examination of conscience with this question: How do I regard people who are very different from me? Do I see these differences as likely to be positive or negative?

Luis Cardinal Tagle of the Philippines, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, issued wise words in a homily. Referring to the pandemic, he said, "We should reflect and pray over the experience to find meaning for us now and in the future."

Reflect, pray, find meaning. *Not* endure, resent, forget. During any scourge or alteration in the daily norm, we

become enveloped by the news; we lament the toll on every aspect of our lives and inflict our concerns and worst-case scenarios on those closest to us. But on the flip side, we are forced to find new ways to function, new ways to engage, and new ways to participate.

During the COVID-19 crisis, we have felt justifiable pride at the mobilizing of manufacturers, members of countless professions and trades, law enforcement personnel, and citizens who have abided by revised restrictions and looked out for one another. We have been overwhelmed with admiration for and gratitude to the health-care workers who have continually put in overtime despite knowing that—like the soldiers who stormed the beaches at Normandy—the longer they worked, the more likely they were to die.

We have been amazed at how good we humans can be when we decide to be.

Our other problems, local and global, remain. What if we could sustain the momentum of the grace-driven surge of goodness? As Cardinal Tagle put it, "The outpouring of compassion that we have seen...needs to be encouraged into the post-pandemic future."

*Jim Auer has written articles, short stories, and homilies since 1972. He contributes regularly to Liguorian magazine and has written more than twenty books. He and his wife, Rose, have been married more than fifty years. They have two grown children and seven "grand urchins" (Jim's witty term).*

## A Fearless Interior Inventory

Do any of these topics stir even a smidgen of prejudice, resentment, envy, or a feeling of superiority in you and trigger problems in your relationships with others?

- Political views and affiliations
- Education or lack thereof
- Income and financial resources
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Culture and customs
- Employment
- Inborn character and personality traits
- Inherent aptitudes and skills

All people would benefit from making what twelve-step recovery programs call "a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" (see Proverbs 4:23–27).

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