

Social Nearness

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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One thing that weighed heavily on Pope Francis during his papacy was whenever we had to observe what popularly came to be known as 'social distancing.' It was the right thing to do at the time in order to reduce the spread of the virus and keep people healthy. 'Social distancing,' however, was actually a contradiction in terms for the pope. Recall that this was the pope who chose to live in the Vatican guest house with other people because he didn't want to live alone in the papal palace. This was also the pope who wrote a document entitled *Fratelli Tutti* in which he called for fraternity among everyone in the human family and highlighted the Good Samaritan as the model for us in drawing near to others. Social distancing for Pope Francis, apart from a pandemic, was bad theology.

In our Gospel this weekend, we hear about another Samaritan, another foreigner, who puts many of us to shame. Notice that towards the beginning of the passage it says that the ten lepers were standing at a distance from Jesus. The distance is significant. By the end, the one healed Samaritan knelt at the feet of Jesus. Here, the closeness is significant. In other words, nine of

the ten stayed socially distant from Jesus even after he healed them and only one came near to say thank you.

‘Social nearness’ suggests a much better theology for Christians than ‘social distancing.’ Social nearness does not mean that we have no boundaries, that we invade people’s personal space, or that we cannot adapt to serious health situations. Rather, it means that if we are to love our neighbors and our enemies as Jesus taught us, then we need to interact with them, even those not of our own liking.

There are many people who feel distant and isolated today, not because of a pandemic, but because a lack of sisterhood and brotherhood among the human family. Following the example of Pope Francis, during this Respect Life month of October we should think of some of the people we need to practice social nearness with: the elderly who live alone, those with diseases that very obviously disfigure their bodies, children whose parents are not in a good state to raise them, prisoners who get very little encouragement that they can recover, ethnic minorities who are discriminated against because of where they were born, sexual/gender minorities who feel betrayed by the people they once thought loved them, the poor who have lost their sense of personal agency in life, and migrants who don’t know where to call home. Oftentimes, we are afraid to get too close to these people because we don’t know what to say or how to fix them. The value

of social nearness, however, is that we don't have to say or fix much. To use another favorite word of Pope Francis, social nearness is simply about accompaniment. Accompaniment means to walk with others. If there is anything to fix, that is up to Jesus.

God calls us to practice 'social nearness' within the human family.

Do I have firsthand and unfiltered experiences of people that are often labeled by society? What positive experiences have I had in drawing near to others, especially those most in need of accompaniment, that allowed Jesus to heal me in the process?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that we may be more like the Samaritans in the Gospels, people who did not practice social distancing, even though that is what people did to them. Instead, let us realize that we are our brother's keeper; we are our sister's keeper. Who knows, in practicing social nearness, maybe we will also grow in our gratitude.