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The sacrament of friendship: disrupting lonely landscapes in American higher education

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Project Thesis

**THE SACRAMENT OF FRIENDSHIP: DISRUPTING LONELY LANDSCAPES
IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

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Only as we see clearly that vocation and ministry are not options for some Christians but are basic to the existence of all Christians, can we begin to make choices that might open up future and hope for the many needs of God's groaning and longing world.

Letty Russell

DEDICATION

To my parents, Diane and Rick Cooper, who always encouraged me to write and who also gave me my first friends—Todd Cooper, Alexis Brooks, Jill Kenney, and Patrick Cooper.

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Boston University School of Theology, 2020

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness is on the rise. Students in higher education report increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression and the non-stop transactional culture rarely leaves time for quiet self-reflection or the cultivation of deep ties. Drawing connections between this spiritual impoverishment and the infantilization of Roman Catholic laity, this project engages a theopoetic of the Holy Trinity and feminist ecclesiology to argue for an expansion of sacramental consciousness. My strategic proposal for transformation rests in the design of a sacramental friendship program that nourishes a posture towards receptivity, innovation, just discipleship, and gratitude. This spacious scaffolding invites students to dig deep into their already holy lives, developing the skills of active listening and mindful presence to prioritize relationships over tasks.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Dana sat on the tiny blue couch by the welcome desk at the Tufts University Interfaith Center. Her hands gripped a tissue in her lap. I helped her to my office down the hall and she sat down. After a minute of gathering herself together, she began to speak.

“I’m so anxious, I can’t leave my dorm room,” her chest heaved with three jagged breathes. “It seems like everyone else is having such an easy time making friends. Nothing feels right here.”

Her long body bent into an S, shoulders seemingly in a race to touch one another. Just weeks before, this young woman had been a beacon of light in our choir. She was generous. She shared her imaginative spirituality, singing with exuberance, filling the chapel with laughter before mass. She took delight in her faith and it was contagious. She was genuinely excited to be at Tufts, but then, she fell off the map.

Dana is not an outlier. She is like so many of her peers at Tufts University and beyond. Loneliness and isolation have been growing in our culture and in the distilled context of higher education, it is an even starker reality. In 2017, the British Prime Minister established a Minister of Loneliness, which served to raise the awareness of this public health issue. Numerous innovative projects—including the Unlonely Project (Boston, MA) and the Loneliness Lab (London, England)—have grown in the past few years to address this issue by offering creative opportunities for meaningful connection. Many of these programs and recent research address loneliness in aged populations, paying special attention to men who are more socially vulnerable than women later in

life. At a time when social media connects us to the world at the touch of screen, it is all the more troubling that experiences of isolation and disconnection are on the rise.

Students like Dana are often surprised to learn that they are not alone. This fact offers some comfort but the rift goes deep. Feelings of disconnection and loneliness are acutely related to depression and anxiety. In the throes of anxiety and depression, the tendency is to turn inward. At the very moment when one seemingly ought to cultivate a posture of generosity facing outwards, the body and spirit hunker down, exacerbating feelings of isolation and despair. Dana's folded frame at the Interfaith Center made physical her spiritual and emotional pain. For many, stigma still hovers as a great deterrent to seeking care. New students also bear the burden of unfair expectations. They have feasted upon misleading narratives around the college experience—film, social media, and well-meaning family members relay stories of an instantly wonderful social life and it haunts them. This false ideal makes it even harder to face and name feelings of loneliness when they do arise.

As is the case with many peer institutions, the Tufts Counseling and Mental Health Services is overburdened. The numbers of students seeking help is far greater than providers and complex needs mean that this issue is far from just a staffing concern. The richness and support of clinical counseling sessions are vital to supporting student mental health, but there is an equally important need to cultivate a healthier culture, one that can hold the expansiveness of spiritual anxiety with respect and care. It takes more than a single program to do this dreaming and seed-planting, but we must begin somewhere if

we are to disrupt the narrative and tell a new story, one which acknowledges student sufferings and creates opportunities for deep, meaningful connection.

In my twelve years as the Catholic Chaplain at Tufts University, I have had the great privilege of walking beside students during the beautiful, painful, and the ultra-mundane moments of their lives. This project grew out of conversations and experiences during this time. In an attempt to stay true to these roots and to the honor the vital role students have played as my best teachers, I have chosen to ground these chapters in lived experience. As a feminist theologian, I honor holiness in the multiplicity of voices and in an inversion of the status quo which has, over time, stifled human imagination and agency. I ground this project in student stories to shift these tides and to witness to the practical wisdom they have to share. I seek to magnify the light they shine, in the hopes of sparking innovation in our church and our world. With the exception of one story, I have changed names and details to respect the identities of students mentioned here in these pages. Joseph and Hamoody, the aforementioned exception, have given me permission to share their story in this project. It is a great honor and privilege to be trusted with the story of their friendship. They have reviewed and signed off on the section in which they appear in Chapter 2.

It is my hope that the insights revealed in these portraits will tell a larger story about the abundance of sacramental moments in our everyday. This narrative approach to theology seeks to honor the holy in the lives of laity, which in this particularly fractured moment of American Catholicism, is all the more important. Disconnection reaches far beyond muted dorm room interactions and into the spiritual lives of our students who are

increasingly without meaningful ties to the religious or philosophical traditions of their upbringing. Shining light on the lives of these lay folks and the capacity of sacramental consciousness will hopefully also inspire a renewed relationship to the tradition. As I have had the great joy of accompanying students on their spiritual journeys, I feel it is my duty to reflect these truths and wisdom back into the world, and spark trust in a more robust, grounded, and expansive sacramental imagination. They are the church—the present and the future—and their truth and wisdom deserve to be heard.

I begin Chapter 2 with an examination of loneliness. I consider the public health implications and how this physical toll functions as a major cost to community. I offer a contextual analysis of loneliness and disconnection in higher education and specifically at Tufts University—including both the reality of student life transitions and specific student populations who are at greater risk of isolation. I also explore the role that social performance and posturing plays in compounding feelings of loneliness and disconnection. I then turn to the relationship between technology and loneliness, complicating what has been a superficial assumption of negative association. With the establishment of these two building blocks—loneliness as a public health issue and loneliness' relationship to technology—I reflect upon the spiritual impoverishment of our time. For lay Catholics living in a culture of clericalism, this thorny issue is even more pronounced. The infantilization of laity has exacerbated experiences of spiritual impoverishment. This fact is all the more painful and ironic as rich elements of our tradition speak clearly to these issues, but often flow just beneath the surface, out of reach to so many who simply have not been exposed to their beauty and greatness.

When Jesus charged the seventy-two to spread the good news, he sent them out to preach and teach ahead of him, two-by-two. Chapter 3 will delve deep into this sense of commissioned partnership. I begin with a theopoetic on the Holy Trinity, reflecting on how Catholics cross ourselves, marking our bodies with trinitarian theology and the essence of divine relationality, interdependence, and mutuality. I then segue into a one particular kind of relationship—friendship—and how it has been studied and celebrated within the tradition. I draw upon the contributions of monastic traditions and contemporary theologies of liberation. These pillars of tradition guide the question of what it means to embrace the threads of deep connection that underscores the Catholic faith and how we might embrace a spirit of renewal and innovation.

While a feminist lens guides this entire project, I devote Chapter 4 to critically engaging with the tradition of feminist ecclesiology. Looking back and looking forward, I use the tools of this tradition to reflect upon my positionality as a Catholic woman chaplain in a secular setting. I use a critical feminist analysis to break open the layers of embedded oppression within the two-part problems of loneliness and clericalism. Drawing from an ecumenical stream of feminist theologians—Letty Russell, Mary Hunt, Shawn Copeland, Mary Elizabeth Moore, Melanie May, Susan Ross—I consider what feminist leadership looks like in this context of ministry and in this moment of history. I argue for an expansive sacramental consciousness, a reframing of our understanding of power, and a reinvestment in the spiritual lives of lay people, many of whom feel stripped of their agency in this church. I tell stories of violation and desperation. In the spirit of witness, these stories demand our attention. Tragically, they are commonplace, but for

that reason, we must speak them aloud. I also tell stories of hope. Feminist spirituality is rooted in deep connection and interdependence. These stories of hope are seeds of promise pointing us towards the new creation, resurrection, and the spirit of innovation.

In Chapter 5, I return to Dana and her powerful re-entry into the community, which grew organically in shared spiritual practice and deep listening. This example provides a natural opportunity to bring together the threads of this project and move towards a practical application. The primary question guiding this chapter is what would it look like if we truly honored friendship as the sacrament it is? How might we plant the seeds for transformation—transformative connection—in the context of higher education where loneliness and spiritual impoverishment weigh heavily on our students? In this concluding chapter, I map out the theological foundation and rationale behind a programmatic offering of sacramental friendship. In this campus program, named The Seventy-Two, I partner students in dyads and triads, challenging them to prioritize the gift of time with one another. A central goal of the Seventy-Two is to empower laity to grow in confidence around matters of faith, to see their lives as sites of holiness and richness. In their dyad or triad, they learn the skills of active listening and deep theological reflection. The Appendix is itself the materials of the Seventy-Two, which could be adapted to parish or secondary school contexts. This nine-week program is designed to help students develop active listening skills and explore a diverse array of spiritual practices. This is not meant to be a stand-alone fix or cure for loneliness in higher education, but rather, a single expression of possibility.

Throughout the project, I engage with the question of time as it is one of the primary adaptive challenges in college chaplaincy and in our current cultural climate. For most of us, students included, time is an ever-present source of anxiety, an unforgiving scarcity. This time-scarcity paradigm is accepted as inevitable. Chapter 5 and the Appendix offer practical ways to engage with time and to reframe our own understanding so we may be prepared to give others our time and be more fully present—to God, ourselves, one another, and to all of creation. While these technical solutions cannot solve an adaptive challenge, they play a critical role as we seek to shift the culture, planting seeds for meaningful connection through friendship and developing muscles for spiritual enrichment.

CHAPTER TWO: LONELINESS AND SPIRITUAL POVERTY

Definition of Loneliness

The term loneliness refers to the “negative emotion arising from subjective evaluations of one’s desired and achieved levels of social contact.”¹ Put another way, it is a social condition of ‘unwanted disengagement from others.’² Loneliness is a personal subjective experience and one that is quite distinct from simply being alone or experiencing solitude. Loneliness has to do with lack of quality relationships. Because loneliness is a perception of isolation, the pain of feeling lonely easily magnifies when one is in a crowd. Social pressure and cognitive dissonance send the message that one ought not feel alone in this particular situation. Such painful irony does well to further compound feelings of disconnection, insecurity, and anxiety. Destructive interpersonal experiences are strong predictors of loneliness—including lack of intimacy and feelings of distrust or conflict.³ Unlike loneliness, solitude is an experience of connectedness. In the words of philosopher and writer Eliot Deutsch, solitude is a “freely chosen spiritual-creative process that in its consummation unites aloneness and togetherness in such a way as to overcome loneliness, transcend ordinary patterns of belonging, and give rise to

¹ Chad Ebesutani, “The Role of Loneliness in the Relationship Between Anxiety and Depression in Clinical and School-Based Youth,” *Psychology in the Schools* 52, no. 3 (March 2015): 224.

² Eliot Deutsch, “Loneliness and Solitude,” in *Loneliness*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 115.

³ Youngmi Sohn, et al., “The Role of Quality College-Based Relationship on Social Media in College-to-Work Transition of Korean College Students: The Longitudinal Examination of Intimacy on Social Media, Social Capital, and Loneliness,” *Japanese Psychological Association* 61, no.4 (October 2019): 237.

intense communion.”⁴ This distinction is important as the problem of loneliness on campus has to do with a deeper, more complicated issue of spiritual impoverishment.

Loneliness as a Public Health Issue

In a 2010 meta-analytical review assessing the association between social relationships and health outcomes, participants with stronger social relationships were found to experience 50% increase in survival.⁵ These findings were consistent across variables such as sex, age, initial health status and cause of death, concluding that social relationships have as great an impact on health as smoking, diet and exercise. In addition to this premature mortality, the negative health outcomes associated with loneliness are many—cardiovascular disease, disability, cognitive decline, depression, high blood pressure.⁶ In his research on lonely people, social neuroscientist John Cacioppo found that health behaviors and choices over time negatively impacted lonely people. In young adults, these behavioral factors did not show health repercussions but by middle aged the difference was much clearer. Lonely adults were more likely to consume more calories

⁴ Paul Tillich has an equally compelling distinction: “Language...has created the word ‘loneliness’ to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word ‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone.” Referenced by Sherry Turkle. Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 65.

⁵ Julianne Holt-Lundstad, Timothy B. Smith and Bradley J. Layton, “Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic review,” *PLoS Medicine* 7, no. 7 (July 27 2010): 14.

⁶ Kerstin Gerst-Emerson and Jayani Jayawardhana, “Loneliness as a Public Health Issue: The Impact of Loneliness on Health Care Utilization Among Older Adults,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no.5 (May 2015): 1013.

per day and to exercise less.⁷ Loneliness contributes to low self-esteem and lower executive control, which has its own effects on activity levels and self-discipline. Cacioppo and his team found that self-medicating behavior—drinking, smoking, overeating, and sexually acting out—increased with loneliness. On a college campus where these activities are already part of the cultural script of ‘college life’ it is easy to see how such compounding factors could exacerbate the issue.

Loneliness chips away at resilience. Lonely folks are more likely to feel threatened and disempowered by the daily realities of life. While non-lonely people are likely to find nourishment and energy from small moments of kindness or joy throughout the day, lonely folks are less affected by such experiences.⁸ This lack of receptivity to the “social lifts” of life speaks to a deeper disconnection. Studies have shown that loneliness increases the amount of stress hormones released in the body, weakening the immune system and causing inflammation.⁹ In addition to the physiological toll of loneliness on the body, social isolation and loneliness deeply affect mental health.¹⁰ They are linked

⁷ John Cacioppo, *Loneliness, Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: Norton Press, 2008), 100.

⁸ John Cacioppo, et al., “Lonely traits and concomitant physiological processes,” *International Journal of Psychophysiology* 35, no. 2 (2000): 151.

⁹ Cacioppo, *Loneliness*, 105.

¹⁰ Ye Luo et al., “Loneliness, health, and mortality in old age: A national longitudinal study,” *Social Science & Medicine* 74, no. 6 (March 2012): 907.

closely to depressive symptoms.¹¹ Cacioppo disentangles depression and loneliness in a way that helps us to see how they inform one another but remain distinct conditions. He writes,

Loneliness reflects how you feel about your relationships. Depression reflects how you feel, period. Although both are aversive, uncomfortable states, loneliness and depression are in many ways opposites. Loneliness, like hunger, is a warning to do something to alter an uncomfortable and possibly dangerous condition. Depression makes us apathetic. Whereas loneliness urges us to move forward, depression holds us back. But where depression and loneliness converge is in a diminished sense of personal control, which leads to passive coping. This induced passivity is one of the reasons that, despite the pain and urgency that loneliness imposes, it does not always lead to effective action.¹²

This tension, this push and pull, speaks to some of the larger cultural concerns around loneliness. It is not a simple problem in need of simple solution, rather it is a multifaceted public health issue and adaptive challenge that requires a fine lens for understanding it in order to create an effective response.

In the past few years, a fair amount of research has been devoted to the issue of loneliness in aged populations. Findings show that chronic loneliness in elderly populations is associated with the cycles of illness and increase use of health care services.¹³ Researchers posited that in addition to seeking help for physical malady, such folks may also be in search of meaningful connection and social contact. While the life circumstances of elder folks is quite different from young adults, this attention to the

¹¹ Such symptoms include feelings of sadness, irritability, anger, loss of pleasure or interest in what has been meaningful, fatigue, anxiety, restlessness, distraction, feelings of unworthiness or guilt, compulsive eating or lack of appetite.

¹² Cacioppo, *Loneliness*, 83.

¹³ Gerst-Emerson and Jayawardhana, “Loneliness as a Public Health Issue,” 1013.

elderly is vital to our understanding of the problem of loneliness.¹⁴ Moreover, it offers a way into thinking about how we might address this issue in younger populations so as to build capacity and strengthen the muscles needed to nourish robust and meaningful relationships throughout one’s life.

Loneliness in the University Context

Each year, the American College Health Association (ACHA) issues the National College Health Assessment (NCHA), which gathers information on student wellness and lifestyle practices—including sexual health, mental health and physical health. In 2017, 61.4% of American undergraduates polled reported feeling “overwhelming anxiety” within the last twelve months.¹⁵ When it comes to loneliness, the numbers are just as telling as 64.4% of undergraduates reported feeling “very lonely” within the same amount of time. Over the past decade these numbers have been increasing, but 2013 marked a point of rapid rise.¹⁶ Loneliness and anxiety are growing globally and they are growing at Tufts University as well. The ACHA’s 2017 study of Tufts University undergraduates affirmed the anecdotal shifts many of us in students-facing positions have

¹⁴ Christian Smith coined the term “emerging adults”. I engage with his work later on in this chapter. Christian Smith, *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out of, and Gone from the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ American College Health Association, *American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Reference Group Executive Summary* (Hanover, MD: American College Health Association, Fall 2017), accessed January 15, 2020, https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II_FALL_2017_REFERENCE_GROUP_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf

¹⁶ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why today’s super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy—and completely unprepared for adulthood—and what that means for the rest of us* (New York: Atria Books, 2018), 104.

witnessed. In our annual survey, almost 60% of Tufts students reported feeling “very lonely” and 55% reported feeling “overwhelming anxiety” within in the last twelve months.¹⁷ On the ground, working with students, we have followed the signposts. The atmosphere feels heavy with performance anxiety and burnout. Calendars are scheduled by half-hour intervals with every moment of the day accounted for. In February of 2015, we had an alarming wake-up call as the university exceeded its projected mental health emergency hospitalizations for the academic year.

In facing this data, we are reminded of the cost of loneliness. It is not simply a box checked in a survey, but a serious obstacle to a healthy life. In addition to these concerns, we in higher education must look at the everyday reality and cost of student loneliness on campus. Classroom and social experiences are deeply affected by loneliness and disconnection. Cacioppo, founder of the field of social neuroscience, gives us a glimpse of this cost in his 2008 book *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. In this text, he cites a study by Anderson and Martin which explored the relationship between loneliness and levels of meaningful involvement in small groups discussions.¹⁸ Their findings showed that lonely students are “less responsive to their classmates during class discussions, and [to] provide less appropriate and less effective

¹⁷American College Health Association, *American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Institutional Data Report – Tufts University* (Hanover, MD: American College Health Association, Spring 2017). Perhaps it should come as no surprise that our students seem to see the tide of anxiety coming. This same survey found that 66% of students asked are “interested in receiving information from the university” on anxiety/depression.

¹⁸ C.M. Anderson and M.M. Martin, “The effects of communication motives, interaction involvement, and loneliness on satisfaction,” *Small Group Research* 26, no. 1 (1995): 118-137.

feedback than nonlonely students.”¹⁹ These results were found even amongst groups where student leaders had the social skills to do this emotional labor and were asked to take on a ‘supportive role.’ While we may think of the pain of loneliness as solely personal and internal, this research reminds us of a deeper interdependence as human beings—if I suffer, we all suffer.

Cacioppo also reflects on the relationship between maturation into adulthood and loneliness. He explains that maturing into adulthood means

gaining control over our unbridled emotions and impulses. Loneliness diminishes that control, then causes more trouble as it engendered other negative emotions such as hostility and anxiety. When we feel lonely, people may see us as aloof, less than empathetic, socially insensitive, perhaps even ungenerous, when deep down what’s really going on is that our cognition and self-regulation are being distorted by fear.²⁰

It is hard to read this passage without considering the macro effects of loneliness on our campus. It is not just one of two students experiencing loneliness, but the ACHA data shows, 60% of our students. How do these factors shape the culture of our campus? Who is at the greatest risk? College is a time of unprecedented opportunity for social connection. If 64.7% of our students are feeling ‘very lonely’ and consequently not engaging fully in the landscape and peoplescope of our campus, I shudder to think of all that is at stake. In 2020, these opportunities are even greater when we consider the role of virtual relationships. Within this context, it is all the more provocative that we are seeing such a rise in disconnection. Dana’s experience speaks well to Cacioppo’s words above.

¹⁹ Cacioppo, *Loneliness*, 181.

²⁰ Cacioppo, *Loneliness*, 169.

This relationship between anxiety and loneliness is an interwoven knot. In her first semester of college, Dana felt anxious about saying the wrong thing and suffering another social sting. Retreating into her room, however, exacerbated her isolation and disconnection, making it even harder to find the words or the courage to try again.

Decrease of empathy means that day-to-day relationships are suffering as are those in the students' future. Our students are awash with opportunities to join clubs and various teams but for many, there is still something missing. As Dana said, "*nothing feels right here.*" This young woman had several points of entry for community in her first few weeks on campus. An internationally ranked athlete, she had been recruited by the coach of her sport and was introduced to the team but quickly learned she was not at all interested in its party culture. Her awareness of the capacity and need for deeper connection was what inspired her to back away from this team, much to the chagrin of the coach. Dana is an interesting case because she possessed the skills for connection and the courage to look for meaningful relationships. In these ways, she is far more equipped than some of her peers. Even with this maturity, or perhaps because of it, she found herself sidelined by this hovering loneliness and fear.

Loneliness and Young Women

Young women often have more social connections than their male counterparts. As they are socialized to consider the needs of others before their own, however, they often care more about what others think of them. This comes hand-in-hand with comparison, a practice which breeds performance anxiety, insecurity, and disconnection. Moreover, females have been found to be more sensitive to the "interpersonal context and

prefer greater interpersonal connectedness, which may make females more sensitive than males to the negative mental health effects of poor social connections.”²¹ I am reminded again of Dana whose perception of the richness of others’ lives and the promise of connection exacerbated her experience of loneliness. Because she was wired to feel the profundity of that loss, the pain was all the more pronounced. Moreover, she blamed herself rather than seeing the greater system and culture at play. It is a complicated web of causes, something I am exploring here in this chapter, but this entanglement makes it all the more challenging to see how it traps us.

When it comes to men, most of the current research concerns the high risk of elderly men for experiencing social isolation and loneliness.²² While young men are certainly not immune to these issues, I turn now to the work of educator and girl’s leadership guru Rachel Simmons and her groundbreaking text *Enough as She Is*. Although Simmons engages primarily with the social pressures young of women in college life, this wisdom speaks to a broader human experience. Men and women, boys and girls of all ages can learn from these findings. Simmons breaks down the relationship between performance and the need to also make said performance seem effortless. This tension corners young women, putting them in the impossible position of feeling they must succeed at every turn—being at once deliberate and spontaneous. Simmons’

²¹ H. Liu et al., “Gender Differences in the influence of social isolation and loneliness on depressive symptoms in college students: a longitudinal study,” *Social Psychiatry and the Psychiatric Epidemiology* (2019): 256.

²² Stephen Neville et al., “Loneliness in Men 60 Years and Over: The Association with Purpose in Life,” *American Journal of Men’s Health* (July 2018): 730–39.

reflection on loneliness helps us to better understand how someone like Dana could fold into herself so abruptly. Simmons writes,

Loneliness thrives on secrecy, and that means shame is close behind. Shame will amplify her loneliness and gut her of motivation to make her life better...Staying busy all the time won't make her feel less lonely. Loneliness happens in part because students are too afraid to leave their laptops or walk out of the library...Loneliness will only begin to abate when they take a break, take a walk or call a friend.²³

In this way, the structures and relationships that pressure students to push onward are exacerbating the larger issue of loneliness. If we only accept the narrowest of definitions of 'productive use of time', then we are setting ourselves up for failure, isolation, and heartache.

Students Populations at Increased Risk of Experiencing Loneliness

Some students are more susceptible to isolation than others. Dreamers, students protected by the DACA program (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and first-generation college students are at particular risk. Their experience of loneliness may be quite different from some of their peers. While there is great overlap in these two student groups (DACA and first-generation), I will address each independently to give adequate attention to the specifics of each case.

DACA students enter college with greater challenges to mental health. Many report feelings of isolation, depression, and stress especially as they are faced with the comparably less complicated lives of their documented peers. College can be the first

²³ Rachel Simmons, *Enough as She Is: How to Help Girls Move Beyond Impossible Standard of Success to Live Healthy, Happy, and Fulfilling Lives* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 162.

time students really learn what it means to be undocumented. DACA students are more likely to have experienced low-self-esteem as a result of their undocumented status and diminished sense of social integration.²⁴ They are entering higher education often far away from family, which for many offers a great source of identity and self-worth.

First-generation students are defined as those who are the first in their family to pursue a four-year degree. They are more likely than their non-first-generation peers to be non-native English speakers from minority backgrounds. They are often older students who are financially independent from family. A growing body of research on first-generation students has revolved around experiences of belonging and mental health. These studies have shown that “the stronger the self-perceived sense of belonging to a campus and community, the greater the likelihood of success.”²⁵ Student retention and graduation rates are highly related to this kind of experience of connectedness or ‘mattering’. While this is true for all students, when it comes to first-generation students and students from other historically underrepresented and underserved populations, it is even more important. First-generation students are more likely to live off campus, which can make it difficult to build bonds with fellow classmates. Moreover, research has shown that they are also less likely to seek out counseling and mental health services than

²⁴ Rachel Simmons et al., “Coming of Age on the Margins: Mental Health and Wellbeing Among Latino Immigrant Young Adults Eligible for Deferred action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA),” *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 19, no.3 (June 2017): 543.

²⁵ Michael Stebleton, Krista J Soria, and Ronald M; Heusman, “First-Generation Students’ Sense of Belonging, Mental Health, and Use of Counseling Services at Public Research Universities,” *Journal of College Counseling* 17, no.1 (April 2014): 9.

their non-first-generation counterparts.²⁶ This means they are inherently less connected to the supportive programmatic offerings that might help them find or create community. For both DACA students and first-generation students, these realities present a major issue. It is an ongoing question for us in student-facing positions as we consider the selection bias of our work. If the over-served population within our community are the most connected and therefore the most conscious of the programmatic offerings of the university, then we perpetuate this oppressive system as they hoard the support, reaping the benefits in so many quantifiable and unquantifiable ways.

Transition to College

As we map out the experience of our current college students, we must interrogate how we arrived at a place of such gross imbalance. In 2014, the *Making Caring Common Project* at the Harvard School of Education identified a ‘rhetoric/reality’ gap.²⁷ When asked what their parents valued most in the child-rearing goals, two thirds of middle and high school students stated that parents and peers cared more about achievement than caring for others. This number is in sharp contrast to the parents’ perception of what they had valued in childrearing—ninety six percent of whom said that the formation of moral character in children was “very important.” Teachers and administrators reflected back the student perception as eighty percent of school adults affirmed that parents were more concerned with achievement than happiness. The implications of this study are profound

²⁶ Stebleton, Soria, and Heusman, “First-Generation,” 15.

²⁷ “The Children We Mean to Raise: The real messages adults are sending about values,” *Making Caring Common*, 11. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/children-mean-raise>

when we consider middle school and high school plant seeds of values and practices for college students. The study argues that, “putting too much emphasis on one’s own accomplishments may also undermine children’s empathy. In our data, ranking achievement first was associated with low levels of empathy.”²⁸ The absence of social and emotional learning in this rubric is critical. Cultivation of empathy, communication, and care for others is what ultimately provides the foundation for professional and personal fulfillment. Often referred to as ‘soft skills’, social and emotional learning prepares young folks to be active, critical, and compassionate players in society.

It does take time to find one’s tribe in a new place but our students also suffer as a result of the outsized and unrealistic narrative of what college should be. Students work hard to gain admission into select schools. They make sacrifices during their high school years with the assumption that college is the end goal and that all of that work will be ‘worth it’. Not too long ago, a first-year student confided in me that he had not really processed the fact that when he got to Tufts life as a student would continue. Admission felt like *the* achievement. Now, taking a full load of classes and navigating the high seas of his college experience, he said the work felt “never-ending”. It is not uncommon for students to absorb the popular cultural script about college which focusses on a highly romanticized social life. These young adults, many of whom are barely eighteen years old, are told that college will be “the best four years of their life.” Casual and well-intended statements like this can have devastating effects on students whose transition to college is less than smooth. Those of us with steady student interaction have heard

²⁸ “The Children We Mean to Raise: The real messages adults are sending about values,” *Making Caring Common*, 11. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/children-mean-raise>

students express these kinds of frustrations and disappointments but a study from Kenyon College found that unrealistic expectations for college negatively impacts student life and contributes to stress levels.²⁹ This was especially true for first year students and seniors. It is telling that these two moments of transition—first year and senior year—mark uniquely challenging times for violated expectations. We are most vulnerable during moments of transition and therefore most in need of support. Unfortunately, this is often when students feel most alienated and disappointed. For those who are already struggling to connect with others, such difficulty reinforces the fear that there is something wrong with them.

Students enter college with the strange new experience of autonomy. This new era can be exhilarating for some and confusing to nearly devastating for others. College-bound young folks are moving away from the immediate intimacies of family and pre-college friends. Moving to campus is a serious disruption of the nest. Students must fasten themselves a new home and develop fresh relationships to satisfy that need for meaningful connection. This means they are at a particularly vulnerable moment for feelings of loneliness. It takes time to and effort to build the skills needed for such relationships. Likewise, it takes both time and often experimentation to develop an awareness of what kinds of relationships best suit and serve them. While particularly acute for some first-year students, “friendsickness” also complicates student lives, regardless of their year. Friendsickness is defined as the “preoccupation with and concern

²⁹ Dana Kreig, “High Expectations for Higher Education? Perceptions of College and Experiences of Stress Prior to and Through the College Career,” *College Student Journal* 47, no. 4 (January 2013): 636.

for the loss or change in precollege friendships”.³⁰ Loneliness has been positively associated with “friendsickness” because the logistical demands of maintaining those relationships are more difficult than initially imagined and energy spent in this direction means less energy spent nurturing new relationships.³¹ In the age of social media, this issue is even more loaded as students may feel at once ‘closer’ to their pre-college friends’ college lives and overburdened by the highly curated stories emerging from these platforms. For folks experiencing loneliness on their new campus, the perception of a seamless transition of a pre-college friend can easily compound feelings of isolation and hopelessness.

Many students come from home and school settings where their lives were overscheduled from the moment they entered kindergarten. As a result, navigating personal time management for the first time can be a struggle. Of course, there are many new students who rise to the challenge and make this transition smoothly but we also see those who flounder with new found freedoms. These students span the gamut from those languishing with the lack of structure to those continuing with what they know—successfully filling each half hour block in their calendars.

Loneliness and Technology

In 2020, any discussion of loneliness must address the reality of online social networks and the unmistakable ways technological devices have permeated of our lives.

³⁰ Elizabeth Paul and Sigal L. Brier, “Friendsickness in the Transition to College: Precollege Predictors and College adjustment Correlates,” *Journal of Counseling and Development* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 78.

³¹ Paul and Brier, “Friendsickness,” 79.

Cigna’s 2018 Loneliness Index found that “levels of in person interaction, physical and mental wellness and life balance are more likely to predict loneliness than social media usage.”³² This data calls us to approach the relationship between loneliness and technology with nuance. As anyone who has had meaningful and even transformative connections online can attest, universally scapegoating social media is inappropriate. Recent research has shown that it is not internet use itself that predicts loneliness, but “internet use that is compulsive in nature—as indicated by factors such as neglect of important obligations in order to go online.”³³ A 2016 study on Instagram usage and loneliness offers greater insight into which usage styles that exacerbate feelings of loneliness. It found that only some kinds of browsing contributed to feelings of loneliness or isolation.³⁴ Students use social media to learn more about their peers and to seek out community. The study found that this kind of use was socially enhancing and contributed to well-being. Other types of browsing were prone to lead to envy and self-doubt. Interestingly, frequent posting or “broadcasting” was related to higher levels of

³² Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index 2018. Cigna and IPSOS.
https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/docs/IndexReport_1524069371598-173525450.pdf

³³ J.P. MacEvoy, M.S. Weeks, and S.R. Asher, “Loneliness,” in *Encyclopedia of Adolescence*, ed. Bradford Brown and Mitchell J. Prinstein (London: Academic Press, 2011), 182.

³⁴ Yang, C, “Instagram Use, Loneliness, and Social Comparison Orientation: Interact and Browse on Social Media, But Don’t Compare,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 19, no. 12 (2016): 703-708.

loneliness, as affirmed by other studies on Facebook status updates.³⁵ In a 2013 study, college students who primarily used Facebook as a means to maintain existing relationships were found to be less lonely than their peers who used the platform as primarily a site for emotionally venting, ‘vaguebooking’, or what on twitter is called ‘subtweeting’.³⁶ These two terms refer to status updates that point towards distress but are deliberately vague. They are attention seeking. There is at once a desire to be seen and a compulsion to withhold information or suppress emotion—keeping vulnerability and clarity safely out of the picture. What this set of studies suggest is that the relationship between loneliness and social media is far subtler than it has sometimes been painted to be. Having said that, however, technology has played a major—and often negative—role in redefining how we occupy public space, how we see ourselves, and how we navigate our relationships with one another.

When I walk through campus, I see eyes gazing into phones and white wires sprouting from ears. Our supercomputers are super-compelling. There is no doubt about it. These devices provide us with endless opportunity for connectivity but we must be careful not to confuse hyper-connectivity with connectedness. Moreover, when we are constantly looking everywhere, anywhere, but *here*—at the landscape and peoplescape

³⁵ Chia-Chen Yang and Brown, B. Bradford, “Motives for Using Facebook, Patterns of Facebook Activities, and Late Adolescents’ Social Adjustment to College,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 42, no. 3 (2013): 403-416. This study suggested that frequent posters were seeking validation, which could have been a result of feelings of loneliness and isolation.

³⁶ Elle Hunt, “Vaguebooking? Subtweeting? Supertweeting? Why Can’t We Just Say What We Mean Online?” *The Guardian*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/may/26/vaguebooking-subtweeting-supertweeting-why-cant-we-just-say-what-we-mean-online>

before us—we are missing the opportunity for spontaneous conversation, connection, and quiet. For students struggling with isolation and loneliness, the smartphone is an even greater liability. They may intellectually know that social media offers a highly curated story—usually one of success, beauty, and happiness—this oppressive stream of images still seeps into the bones. Those lines are not so neat—browsing for community versus browsing to compare. Moreover, the pressures to perform at a high level and the expectation of success makes it easier to assume that others are not experiencing the same struggles. As Dana said, “*It seems like everyone else is having such an easy time making friends.*”

Research tells us that just the presence of a cell phone can keep us from opening up to one another.³⁷ The takeaway here is that divided attention translates to decrease in empathy.³⁸ Regardless of whether the device is silenced or hidden, the threat looms—potential interruption degrades meaningful human connection, making it even harder to develop an authentic sense of belonging. Intimacy depends on attention to detail and authentic presence. It is no wonder then that in the presence of such compelling devices, conversations reside at the surface level. We are less likely to make ourselves vulnerable if we suspect our contributions will not be held with adequate care.

³⁷Andrew Przybylski and Netta Weinstein, “Can you Connect with Me Now? How the Presence of Mobile Communication Technology Influences Face-to-Face Conversation Quality,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationship* 30, no. 3 (2012): 244.

³⁸ Shilani Mirsa, Lulu Cheng, and Jamie Genevie, “The i-Phone Effect: The Quality of In-Person Social Interactions in the Presence of Mobile Devices,” *Environment and Behavior* 48, no.2 (February 2016): 291.

Skimming the Web, Skimming the World

This skimming of the surface in conversation is not unlike our scanning of content online. We are using the same muscles—charting the same neuropathways—whether we are skimming the world, one another, or the text on the screen. Much neurological research has been devoted to the effects of multitasking on our attention spans. Despite student confidence in their ability to multitask, again and again the data shows that when our attention is divided, we can no longer hold complex thoughts with as much depth and imaginative engagement. Researchers have found that fragmented reading—that is, reading interrupted by pings and browsers—restricts our thinking, preventing us from delving deep, contemplating text, and critically engaging.³⁹ In his 2010 book *The Shallows*, journalist Nicholas Carr explored the neurological and cultural effects of our web-based reading. He employs a rich image early on in the work to juxtapose the web-based reading from deep reading. “Once I was a scuba diver in a sea of words,” he says, but “now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.”⁴⁰ This powerful image captures so much about the shifting tides of our modern time. The scuba diver and the jet skier experience the ocean in completely different ways. Diving requires an immense amount of focus. Divers have to be constantly aware of their depth, direction, rate of breathing, elapsed time, location, and buoyancy. They must remain orientated to the underwater

³⁹ Yan Liu and Xiaoqing Gu, “Media Multitasking, attention, and comprehension: a deep investigation into fragmented reading,” *Educational Technology Research Development* (April 2019): 83.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2010), 7.

world and their place within it. For recreational divers, however, the main objective is to enjoy what is beneath the surface. Savoring the beauty of the environment is paramount.⁴¹ The jet skier on the other hand, is darting from point A to point B. There simply is no time or perspective to see the deep, much less take in its beauty. We get the sense of exploration and wonder in the former and the thrill of rush—by adrenaline and velocity—with the latter. So many of us can relate to the displaced scuba diver, but looking closely into our brains, we see what exactly is happening moment by moment.

Carr explains:

the need to evaluate links and make related navigational choices, while also processing a multiplicity of fleeting sensory stimuli, requires constant mental coordination and decision making, distracting the brain from the work of interpreting text of other information. When we as readers, come upon a link, we have to pause, for at least a split second, to allow our prefrontal cortex to evaluate whether or not we should click on it. The redirection of our mental resources, from reading words to making judgements may be imperceptible to us—our brains are quick—but it's been shown to impede comprehension and retention, particularly when it's repeated frequently.⁴²

These seemingly tiny distractions take us away from the moment, from digging beneath the surface and making meaningful connections. Moreover, we are less likely to be able to return to the scuba life if we do not work out those muscles for deep diving.

These patterns of disruption and the ongoing search for the next bit of compelling content have bled into our day to day lives. It is easy to fill our worlds with 'noise' rather than cultivate a comfort with silence. Podcasts, audiobooks, infinite music choices, not to mention 24/7 access to social media just by reaching into our pockets—these elements of

⁴¹ Philip Ashley, interviewed by author, Providence, August 18, 2019.

⁴² Carr, *The Shallows*, 122.

our media saturated culture are not inherently bad. In fact, they can be fabulously enriching. What is dangerous, however, is how we are using—or indeed getting used by—this technology. We see how the online dating scene has made human beings feel like a commodity. Swipe left is a kind of mantra for the world in which we live. There is always more content to consider, more potential dates to scroll through, a greater perception of possibility which in and of itself limits our own ability to live out possibility in real time. This is part of spiritual poverty. The prickly fear of silence and solitude is assuaged and avoided by submitting to the ‘noise’. When we skim the world or numb-out to streams of fascinating—and/or vapid—content, we are sacrificing the present moment and present context for something somewhere else. This is a kind of disembodiment and displacement. A veneer of connectivity keeps us from diving deep into the reality before us. Of course, sometimes we need to be ‘transported’ but if we are numb to and ignorant of our own inner landscape, we are denying ourselves the opportunity to explore the deep—both in ourselves and in others.

In her 2018 book *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in the Digital Age*, Tufts University professor Maryanne Wolf explores her own distressful experience of charting a major shift in her reading comprehension and endurance with the page. Once a literature major, when she returned to the books of her youth, she found she was unable to truly sink into them. She was incapable of entering into the state of deep reading that had allowed her to comprehend and wrestle with these texts years ago. ‘Deep reading’ is being immersed in a text. It is a kind of surrendering. When deep reading, the reader is swept into the pace of the author’s words, the lyricism, poeticism, structure and cadence.

The reader is connected to the writer and to the world they have created. Deep reading cultivates empathy and compassion. It is a way of learning about those who are different from the reader, offering a doorway into their lives, questions, and struggles.

Deep reading provides a novel experience of the present moment. In our digital age, however, it can be difficult to get into this state of mind and connection to even begin to work out those atrophied muscles. To stay on the page, in the text, the reader must create a physical and mental context which will help support this kind of thinking. When engaging with the world, these muscles for deep reading and deep listening—or lack thereof—affect how we encounter each moment. Sometimes it is a matter of imagining a new way of living. In supporting student religious and philosophical life, how do we offer opportunities—or tastes—of being in the world this way? How might we spark that spirit of innovation and disrupt the skimming narrative? How might we help shape a context and culture to support the lifelong skill set of deep reading—deep reading of our world, one another, and of our lives?

The Role of Social Performance

As with many of our peer institutions, anxious energy is palpable on our campus. Students come to Tufts University at great personal financial cost and the pressure is on to make the most of this investment. Our students are used to excelling. Many are unfamiliar with experiencing failure and the fear of failure can be nearly paralyzing. Performance plays such a large role in student life. They are performing in the classroom, but many are also performing busyness, living at an unsustainable pace of life to prove their worthiness. In addition to being exhausting, such posturing breeds loneliness and

isolation as students continually seek validation. When one is forever vying for entry into an elite space, it is hard to let one's guard down and share questions and doubts.

Many people who are over-extended may not even notice that they are lonely. A wealth of compelling distractions facilitate denial and protect us from the discomfort of quiet moments. Discomfort with silence and the self is part of the greater dis-ease in our culture. We see this manifest on our campus. There is a tendency to confuse solo web surfing or earbud listening with solitude. Solitude, however, is dependent upon the quieting and stilling of the mind, it cannot grow out of an experience of 'noise', numbness, or distraction. Such a misunderstanding is an interesting twist as the veneer of this pseudo-solitude may in fact be increasing feelings of isolation. Given the social stigma, even folks who are aware of their loneliness are likely to keep it to themselves.

Over the years, I have spoken with students who are insecure about their level of busyness in whole other way. The culture of high achievement and workaholism is so pervasive, they assume that there must be something wrong with them if they are not burning the candle at both ends. Even those who are deliberately or accidentally incorporating rest into their lives are often not able to fully 'enjoy' this experience. It is not just the silence in one's own mind that causes discomfort, but the presumed judgmental gaze of others should they choose to explore that personal space. The collapse of worth into a single-definition of productivity is something we see in our wider societal structure, but these ways of thinking are intensified within the compressed experience of campus life. Students report not wanting to share their bad news with one another because they do not wish to bring one another down. At the same time, I hear the

opposite is also true as those with good news worry about making it too much about themselves. In this atmosphere, there is no way to ‘win’. The pressure to be ‘just right’ and ‘not too much’ is leading to silence and secrecy. This absence of vulnerability and transparency is a breeding ground for feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The desire to control feelings of disconnection by numbing is something we see quite a bit in the university context. While students may engage in specific self-medicating behaviors—alcohol, drugs, acting out sexually—many also rely upon hyper-scheduled calendars and school work to serve as all-consuming distractions. Within with the imbalanced culture of higher education, these activities are endorsed, sanctioned, even encouraged. They contribute to the narrative that affirms “if I am busy, I am doing this college thing correctly.” I empathize with the desire for road signs on this journey. Any student who enters Tufts has been excelling within a competitive field of other high achieving peers. It should come as no surprise then that they are used to seeking external markers for validation.

A few years ago, I had an experience with a student that helped me to better understand this larger picture of performance and busyness. I had bumped into this rising senior at lunch in the chapel and we discussed finding a time to meet up. I always saw this student rushing from place to place with an enormous backpack on his back and laptop under his arm. As we traded blocks of times that might work for both of us, he reached into his pocket and forcefully handed me his phone. He requested that I sift through his schedule to find a time that worked for me. The screen in front of me was a veritable rainbow of rectangles. It looked like a puzzle or a video game. It took me a

moment to figure out that I was looking at a calendar. There were layers and layers of blocks some overlapping, some bursts of fifteen-minute coffee meet ups. Others were classes stretching across a four-hour periods. This exchange was jarring for many reasons. Of course, it was a little awkward and maybe rude, but I found myself most concerned by what this gesture communicated. With no words at all, he had expressed something that so many of our students struggle with. One of the central elements of our culture that prizes busyness as a virtue is the toxic assumption that “my worth is inextricably linked to my capacity to spread myself as thin as possible.” In other words, a sign of my success is living at an unsustainable pace. In this gesture, I saw a desire to be seen. It was not enough to be busy, but he had to perform the busyness, have it witnessed and therefore validated. Sadly, this kind of performance of busyness keeps others at a distance. It says, “I am worthy because of the things I do, not because of who I am—in all my complexity”. It says, “I spend my time because time is meant to be spent.” Over-commitment and the facsimile of hyper-connectivity are very effective distractions. This further complicates the issue of loneliness for many students, leaving them with little or no time to even reflect on their state of being.

Spiritual Impoverishment

When Dana drifted into her room for those two months, she suffered but our community suffered as well. It is not just individuals who suffer in isolation but entire networks of human beings. We were suddenly without her beaming presence, her rich theological imagination and the poetic prayers that seem to effortlessly roll off her tongue in abundance. We were incomplete. Our social sickness of loneliness is one that

sociologists and medical doctors have studied but it is also something that theologians and ministers must contemplate. How does loneliness touch the soul? How does it affect spiritual formation and discipleship—for the individual and the whole? How is our Catholic Community at Tufts suffering as a result of the loneliness and disconnection on our campus? Similarly, in work that is routinely grounded in ‘showing up’ for others, how are our interfaith capacities and seeds for transformation impeded by these absences? How might this worsening public health issue be a call to spiritual renewal and not just be seen as a breach that needs ‘fixing’? Ultimately, what does it mean to be the Body of Christ in this moment, in this context?

In his 2013 address to the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See, Pope Francis reflected upon his choice of taking the name of St. Francis of Assisi. This moment deserves to be taken within its context. It was at the very beginning of his pontificate—within weeks of beginning his papacy. Amongst Catholics and non-Catholics, there was great anticipation around how he would embody the significance of this interesting name choice. There had, after all, never been a Pope Francis. In what ways would he live into Saint Francis’ love of the poor? Stories were pouring out about his penchant for riding the bus in his home city of Buenos Aires. What would it look like for the pope to embrace humility and compassion in what at the time felt like a very refreshing way? In his formal address to the Diplomatic Corps, Pope Francis shined light upon the suffering of so many who have been forgotten. He brought orphans, the sick, homeless folks, and other marginalized people to the center of the conversation. In the same breath, however, he transitioned to speak about another kind of poverty, spiritual

poverty. This sickness, he said, “afflicts the so-called ‘richer countries’ particularly seriously.”⁴³ This single sentence upends so many assumptions. It questions the categories of poor and rich, directing attention to the very real suffering that happens at the hands of both scarcity and excess—material and spiritual. We often think of poverty of spirit as relating to the gospels and Jesus’ call to empty ourselves so we may have room for God and the Holy Spirit. This terminology usually requires unpacking. It is tricky language, embodying the inside-out and upside-down nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. In this instance, however, Francis is using the language of spiritual poverty to get at the shallowness and rootlessness that comes from material excess. The spiritual impoverishment we see on campus mirrors the spiritual impoverishment of our society. If the goals of higher education were originally to form whole persons, we have certainly gone adrift, sending forth students who are rigorously trained academically but less mature in terms of emotional intelligence. While many students are not in a place where they can risk expressing such feelings of ambivalence, I have encountered some whose emotional intelligence and composure have allowed them to ‘go there’—to peak around the corner and ask the big questions of purpose and worth.

A few years ago, an exchange student named Luis came to chat with me during office hours. He gave me a novel. It was a book he had just finished and he thought I would appreciate it. This gesture surprised me as it is rare for students to be carrying

⁴³ Pope Francis, *To the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, 22 March 2013, Papal Archive, Holy See, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130322_corpo-diplomatico.html.

eight hundred-page free-reading books during the semester grind. To say Luis was an accomplished young scholar would be a gross understatement. He was deeply involved in his research and civic life. He did not speak about his accomplishments or the diverse array of activities with which he engaged on our campus and I had never really seen him anxious or hurried. Even in the mist of finals, he seemed as calm as ever, simply stating there was a lot to do but this seemed familiar territory to him. Though it would be challenging, he was confident it would unfold as needed. He sat in my office that day, wearing jeans, an 80's band t shirt, and checkered black and white Vans. He had been sitting back but then he leaned in close to my chair. As he exhaled, a litany of questions filled the space of my office: "I just don't know why I try so hard. You work so hard in high school to please your parents and get into college but why work hard in college? What am I racing towards?" He paused to let that question fill the space between us. And then he continued, "Why am I doing this? Am I supposed to live like this forever?" Of course, Luis' existential reflections were not unique to him but it was powerful to be witness to such vulnerability and honesty. He showed intense self-awareness around an unnamed hunger and the need for more meaning. Many of Luis' classmates feel similarly—I have anecdotally heard students ask these kinds of questions—but few people, regardless of age, have the courage to voice these deep-seated feelings of ambivalence. The pressure to keep going is real and to choose to pause at all is to decide to prioritize the 'deep reading' of life. It feels almost too perfect that he came in with that large novel under his arm. He was used to deep reading text and deep reading life. Gifting it to me that day, I see that he was eager for others to be with him on this journey.

Infantilization of Laity

Before the Second Vatican Council, the lay faithful were considered the bottom of the pyramid. They were treated like children in many ways, and told time and time again—implicitly and explicitly—that their state of being served a lesser purpose in the church. This model perpetuated an insidious and false dichotomy between worldly lives and spiritual lives, creating a chasm between laity and clergy—and this encouraged lay folks to consider their day-to-day realities unholy or unworthy of spiritual reflection. Low expectations for laity marked their disempowered place in the church and stripped them of agency in shaping community. This kept them in a state of spiritual arrested development. Clergy occupied a privileged place in the church—and sometimes in society at large—assuming a paternal role with their parishioners as ‘dependents’ or ‘sheep’. This top down dynamic planted the long-term seeds for clericalism in the minds and bodies of clergy and lay alike. Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther defines ‘clericalism’ as

the separation of ministry from mutual interaction with community and its transformation into hierarchically ordered casts of clergy and laity. The clergy monopolize teaching, sacramental action, and administration and turning to the community into passive dependents who are to receive these services from clergy but cannot participate in shaping and defining themselves.⁴⁴

These words from Radford Reuther were published in this passage in 1985, two decades after Vatican II. Sadly, her words continue to speak to our Church in the present as the culture of clericalism persists today. As Catholics in the twenty-first century, however, it is imperative that we acknowledge the role that silence and secrecy have played in

⁴⁴ Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1980), 75.

maintaining clericalism. Revelations of abuse and cover-up have taught us how much secret keeping has functioned like cancer in our institution. Shame and this tradition of silence/silencing has compounded these sicknesses of spiritual impoverishment and loneliness.

A tragic centuries-old misinterpretation of the role of ‘shepherd’—and therefore the metaphorical significance of the ‘shepherd’—has led to a toxic dynamic in which some clergy are conditioned to believe that the sheep should follow them. In actuality, shepherds lead from behind or amongst the sheep. In his 2013 Holy Thursday sermon, Pope Francis famously attempted to course correct as regards this image. He implored priests to be “shepherds with the odour of sheep.”⁴⁵ This evocative language is a call to walk amongst and to listen and live with God’s people as opposed to distancing oneself in a compassion-less fortress of bureaucracy.

The Second Vatican Council redefined the position, identity, and call of lay people within the church, exhorting them to embrace their baptismal call. Conciliar documents like *Lumen Gentium* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* named the lives of laity as rich sites of wisdom. They stated the need to engage meaningfully with this material with fresh appreciation in order to fully thrive. In the words of *Lumen Gentium*,

Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can easily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission. Rather, enlightened by Christian

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, *Chrism Mass*, 28 March 2013, Papal Archive, The Holy See, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html.

wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role.⁴⁶

This passage is particularly potent as it explicitly subverts the culture of clericalism and lifts up the specific gifts of the lay faithful. They do not need to defer to clergy, rather, they are worthy of taking up space and shedding their own light upon the challenges of the church.

To offer a bit of sobering clarity, however, Catholic theologian Avery Dulles has acknowledged a glaring omission in the conciliar documents. He writes,

At several points Vatican II urged pastors to consult the laity and to listen to them when they speak with competence (LG, No. 37, Nos. 43, 62). But at no point did it suggest that the hierarchy have any obligation to accept the recommendations of the laity with regard to matters pertaining to the pastoral office. While encouraging cooperation with priests, deacons and lay persons, the council placed the powers of authoritative teaching, sacramental worship and pastoral governments squarely and exclusively in the hands of the hierarchy.⁴⁷

Dulles' reading sheds light on the practical application of Vatican II or lack thereof. It offers a way into understanding the dissonance that so many faithful folks feel regarding the relationship between this supposed landmark moment and the reality of being Catholic in the twenty-first century. While there may not be institutional directives to support authentic mutuality and incorporation of lay recommendations, how might we actively organize to support prophetic disruptions within laity? How might we encourage the them to take ownership of their baptismal call to be the church, to embrace just

⁴⁶ Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964. Vatican City, GS 43. This male-centric language is noteworthy even if unsurprising.

⁴⁷ Avery Dulles, "Vatican II: The Myth and the Reality," *America*, February 24, 2003, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/423/article/vatican-ii-myth-and-reality>.

discipleship? In the coming sections, I will explore this disconnect more fully and present a single expression of such a disruption.

Lay Ecclesial Movements Post Vatican II

The immediate years following Vatican II saw a sharp sea change in the landscape of lay ecclesial life. This designation (lay ecclesial movement) includes fraternities such as Communion and Liberation, Focolare, Community of Sant’Edigio, and Neo-Catechumenal Way. These ministries embrace and honor contextuality and in that way, they are in direct ‘descendants’ of conciliar documents like *Lumen Gentium* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. They are not universal in their ideology. Some are more centered on honoring Vatican II and ecumenism and others are more drawn to a preservation of tradition and what they view as orthodoxy. While these movements have certainly played a role in redefining lay formation and mission, they are relatively limited in scope and have played a strange role in actually exploiting elements of the spirit of Vatican II to perpetuate an old culture of elitism.⁴⁸ They have certainly shaped Catholic culture in Europe (Italy specifically) and parts of the global south—resulting in more vocations to the priesthood in those regions—but they (lay ecclesial movements) are less present in the American Catholic landscape. I highlight this disconnect because it is worth noting that these movements have not fully captured the kind of lay involvement that they claim to embrace. They are not a wholesale sign of ‘success’ in the questions of

⁴⁸ Massimo Faggioli, “How are new ecclesial movements changing the Church?” *Commonweal*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/how-are-new-ecclesial-movements-changing-church>. Faggioli refers to this pattern as “yet another example of how the living body of the Church undoes the best-intentioned and most well-thought-out reform projects of ‘enlightened’ theologians.”

lay empowerment. Ironically, some of these fraternities often consolidate power and build walls to create insiders-outsiders. Many have been associated with the secular agendas. This is in stark contrast to the kind of agility and contextuality that Vatican II documents gave witness to as a means to celebrate and honor God's diverse creation.⁴⁹

Vatican II and Lay Faithful: Aspirations and Reality

There is a telltale incongruity in the Vatican II documents, the story told by lay ecclesial movements, and the on the ground realities of parishes in the American Catholic landscape. Each September I see the signs of this disconnect. Most Catholic students arrive at Tufts University with zero experience serving at their home parish. Many have attended mass each week and perhaps even received the sacrament of Confirmation, but they have been conditioned to take the back seat in matters of church. For Catholic theologian Paul Lakeland, this is a symptom of the large issue of lay people's the systemic oppression within the Catholic Church. He writes,

Catholic laity, for the most part, do not know of their oppressed condition and would deny it if it were argued in their presence. There are, of course, many forms of oppression. Perhaps the worst, spiritually if not physically, is the one in which the captives have been induced to embrace their own oppression...Because the laity are oppressed, the church itself is oppressed.⁵⁰

For lay Catholics, the experience of sitting passively in the pews on Sunday has been lauded, upheld has answering the 'call'. In fact, my earliest memory of mass quite

⁴⁹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, a Vatican II conciliar document dedicated the liturgy, sought to honor the particularity of context. It focused on realizing the many diverse ways that gospel can and should be communicated so as to speak to the culture realities and needs of the faithful.

⁵⁰ Paul Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 187.

literally exemplifies this dynamic. We were sitting in the annex of the Our Lady of Fatima Church in Wilton, Connecticut where we attended every Sunday—my mother, brothers and sisters and I. While sitting on my mother’s lap, I fell asleep. After mass, a woman came up to my mother to say hello. She gestured towards me and praised me for being so well behaved. Though I was only six or seven, I remember thinking it was strange. What was the message? That I should sleep through church? Better to be asleep and quiet than to actually listen or take up even a bit more space—physically or auditorily? Even as a child, it seemed like an exceedingly low expectation. In my teenage years, I would return to this woman’s words, as my suspicions grew about the way I felt in the house of God. Does God want me to feel this way, I would ask myself? Fearful of making a mistake, ashamed by my personality, identity, uncomfortable in my own body? I do not fault my mother’s friend—she was simply relaying the message she had received her whole life. What I do take issue with is any culture that explicitly or implicitly sends the message which I had absorbed—take up less space, sleep if you must, just do not disrupt the show.

The culture of clericalism reinforces the silencing of those who make up the vast majority of the Church. The rich, diverse, and dynamic daily experiences of laity have been omitted from the narrative, and thus deemed unqualified for religious meaning making. This in effect means that the lives of lay people are seen—by themselves and by some clergy—as less holy, less worthy of the active attention and reverence Catholics have been trained to give Sacraments or the Mass. Spiritual impoverishment thrives in such a transactional context. There is less emphasis on an authentic faith life. Folks may

be satisfied with a certain kind of performance of piety but without the groundswell of spiritual practice or deep questioning. We see how this foundation of self-doubt restricts the religious imagination of laity. For Lakeland, this is far more insidious than just the absence of lay people from leadership positions. He writes that

much more troubling is the crippling effect on lay consciousness of lack of voice and its concomitant marginalization, a phenomenon that as a matter of fact has one of its consequences the decreased probability that many laypeople would be qualified to put themselves forward for just the sorts of positions of leadership in the church.⁵¹

Lakeland rejects simplistic solutions that tell us to hire more lay people. He is addressing the adaptive challenge of reshaping the culture within our parishes. It is not enough to shrug and complain that spirit of Vatican II has not been fully implemented. Rather, we must address the internal landscape of American lay Catholics, which reveals a deeper, more fundamental spiritual impoverishment. Moreover, his acknowledgement of the systemic oppression of lay people identifies the structure as a problem and does not blame individual lay people—or clergy, who are also suffering within the abusive system—for not knowing more or doing more. Returning to Dulles, if opinions and feedback of lay people are never meaningfully engaged with or implemented, then it is no surprise that folks are less likely to step forward. Coupled with the structures of parish life and the greater hierarchy within the church, this culture of clericalism has collectively strengthened a disempowering feedback loop which has sadly defined the ecclesial experience for most laity. Spiritual impoverishment is exacerbated by these dynamics.

⁵¹ Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity*, 197.

Our student leaders consistently report that their newfound place in ministry at Tufts' Goddard Chapel is a true surprise. When alumni reflect back on their roles in the Catholic Community at Tufts, they often say they would have never imagined being so integral to the Catholic landscape. They had not had an experience of ownership in their home parishes and so they were quite literally incapable of imaging a rich spiritual life, let alone inspiring others as a spiritual leader. This is a particular symptom of the culture of clericalism and we see here how it bleeds into the personal faith lives of laity, keeping their worlds small and limiting their imaginations for what is possible. The spirit of Vatican II has clearly not translated into the fiber of most local parishes if I am seeing such a trend of passivity in students.⁵² There have also been backlashes within the church. Pope John Paul II feared at once the "clericalization" of laity from increased ministerial positions and the laicization of clergy. In fact, he resented even the use of the term 'ministry' as regards lay people serving in the church.⁵³ Additionally, many younger seminarians have doubled-down on the culture of clericalism, entering the priesthood with a set of expectations that we might think were more fitting to a pre-conciliar era. In a recent piece calling for a reconfiguration of US seminaries, Jesuit priest and journalist Thomas Reese explains the pattern which many of us have seen in the field as such:

The documents of the Second Vatican Council are either downplayed or interpreted through a conservative lens. In too many places by too many faculty, moral theology is presented in a legalistic framework in which everything is black

⁵² Of course, there are students who arrive to campus from congregations with robust youth groups and thus are engaged and excited to be part of the community—maybe even at a leadership level—but these folks are few and far between.

⁵³ Lakeland, Paul, "A New Sense of Adulthood Marks Post-Conciliar Laity," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 11, 2012, 29.

and white. This has been going on in American seminaries since at least the mid-1990's, after conservative bishops consolidated their control over seminaries. The result is that many parishioners are unhappy with their pastors.⁵⁴

These factors continue to play out each year. I hear how students and their families are experiencing the repercussions of these dynamics. While this is a multifaceted issue I do not wish to oversimplify, I do think that one of the first ways forward is naming and addressing spiritual impoverishment. This is foundational to moving forward.

Catholic Emerging Adults

Christian Smith's 2014 book, *Young Catholic America*, wrestles with fundamental questions around religiosity and spiritual life of younger generations. This sociological study builds upon the landmark research of Smith and Lisa Pearce and their National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). Beginning in 2001, NSYR sought to enrich our understanding of spiritual and religious landscape of young people. Smith has long been a leader in the field of emerging adult spirituality. He employs the term *emerging adult* to meaningfully reflect the shift in expectations and experience that has come in the last decades of the 20th century and which has continued—and has perhaps even been amplified—in this new millennium.⁵⁵ The majority of young people are no longer finding stable work at eighteen, marrying at twenty, and starting a family at twenty-one. That trajectory is now a thing of the past, harkening back to an era before the GI bill, which rapidly increased access to education. Today, young folks are remaining in higher

⁵⁴ Thomas Reese, "The Catholic Church's Seminaries Need Reform," *Religious News Service*, February 13, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/signs-times/catholic-churchs-us-seminaries-need-reform>.

⁵⁵ Christian Smith, *Young Catholic America*, 4-6.

education longer, often with financial assistance from their parents, and ultimately, marrying much later in life. Smith's own words offer clarification for this newly unique period of life:

Emerging Adulthood is not simply an extension of teenage life, which normally remains highly dependent on parents and structured by high school. Nor is it the beginning of a fully settled adulthood as marked by marriage, children, career, and homeownership. Rather, emerging adulthood embodies its own distinctive characteristics, tendencies, and experiences. Many of these have implications for religious faith and spiritual life.⁵⁶

In *Young Catholic America*, Smith and his colleagues examine the NSYR data from Catholic young adults. The work rejects overly simplistic comparisons of young adult Catholics to earlier generations and instead devotes its study to the diversity of practice, identity, and expression of identity within the landscape of Catholic young adults. He contextualizes this conversation by offering a litany of cultural factors and events which have directly and indirectly shaped the faith and practices of today's Catholic and ex-Catholic emerging adults:

Catholic socioeconomic upward mobility; suburbanization, and cultural assimilation; the uneven implementation of the Second Vatican Council in diocese and parishes; the enthusiasm and subsequent frustration of Catholic liberals; the drastic decline in the number of priests and religious brothers and sisters; the widespread loss of faith in the Church as a the final authority in matters of faith and morals; the polarization of many issues in the Church; the dramatic decline in weekly Mass attendance; the deterioration of effective catechesis of Catholic youth; the influence of the cultural and sexual revolutions in American society; and much more.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280.

⁵⁷ Smith, *Young Catholic America*, 264.

While most Catholic folks can tell you that attendance numbers for Sunday mass have been falling for decades amongst white American Catholics, Smith and his colleagues suggest that another ‘crucial factor’ has been the shift in parental education in spiritual formation.⁵⁸ Whereas parents of the past modeled practices of faith and taught the tradition at home, parents of emerging adults in the NYSR were far less likely to have played this role in their children’s lives.⁵⁹ Interestingly enough, Smith found that young adult Catholics in the 1970’s were not that unlike their 2000’s counterparts, which supported the conclusion that the major shifts in the practices and attitudes of Catholic young adults happened decades ago. What was a significantly different about these populations, however, was the rapid drop in mass attendance by emerging adults since the 1970’s.⁶⁰

Though Vatican II called for a greater incorporation of lay gifts and vision into the fabric of the Church and its mission and ministry, laity have largely continued to be infantilized. Moreover, it is not uncommon for the very attempts at empowering laity to perpetuate this culture of disempowerment. As Gerard Mannon observes, this twist is not simply an accident or a result of negligence. He writes, “ironically, a lack of openness

⁵⁸ Smith, *Young Catholic America*, 87. The Hispanic Catholic community has played large role in revitalizing parishes across the United States but as Smith writes, the varying degrees of observance between Hispanic emerging adults depends upon their proximity to immigration. Second and third generation Hispanic emerging adult Catholics are less likely to hold onto foundation Church teachings as tightly as their first-generation peers.

⁵⁹ Smith, *Young Catholic America*, 265.

⁶⁰ Smith, *Young Catholic America*, 265. Smith also goes onto report that Catholic emerging adults are also less likely to ‘rebound’ to return to mass later in life. In the past, the milestone moments of marriage and children have served to rekindle a relationship with the church but such trends are not as reliable as they have been in the past.

around lay participation is sometimes shielded behind claims to *increase* lay participation.”⁶¹ Purposeful and transparent restructuring is foundational to encouraging the lay faithful to live fully into their baptismal calls. While this kind of structural innovation is outside the scope of this project, our inner landscape might serve as a new wineskin and we must prepare ourselves for change within our institution, by cultivating lay leadership qualities through imagination, spiritual formation, and just discipleship.

Sacramental Consciousness

Our tradition may have a rich history of tending to these kinds of spiritual sicknesses—loneliness and anxiety—but for most young folks in the church, these resources and practices are virtually unknown. Religious Education has focused an enormous amount of energy on the seven official Sacraments. While such education and formation is important it has eclipsed some of the other entry points into a meaningful relationship to the tradition. Spiritual practice has remained at the level of prayer recitation and rarely are folks encouraged to embrace a more expansive definition of prayer. Whereas Catholics of another generation may have absorbed what theologian Andrew Greeley calls the Catholic imaginative—the deeply sacramental consciousness that comes through imaginative engagement with aesthetics and story—most contemporary young Catholics have not encountered this rich component of the tradition.⁶² Most have not been invited into a deeper, more spiritually mature relationship

⁶¹ Gerard Mannon, “New Wine and New Wine Skins: Laity and a liberative future of the church,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 11, no. 2 (2007): 195.

⁶² Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

with their faith. As a result, the spiritual impoverishment of young Catholics is partly due to perpetuation of a false duality—faith life versus regular life. Sacramental moments of the everyday variety ought to be informing and enriching the experience of the big S Sacraments within liturgy—and vice versa. Placing these in conversation with one another is the beginning to a more holistic and integrative life as a disciple.

Laity have been conditioned to only think of the sacraments as something that happen within liturgy, in church—in sanctioned spaces where the hierarchical structures distribute them. Sadly, less energy is put in the direction of everyday sacramental consciousness. Staying awake to the holy in our midst, is key to unlocking sacramental consciousness. This is an imagination problem that has grown out of larger trends spanning the last half a century. Greeley’s work on the Catholic imaginative acknowledges the richly poetic inner world of laity. He employs the term ‘enchanted imagination’ suggesting that historically laity have remained the curators of the tradition’s texture and this despite the fact that their hierarchy has substituted rules for art and story. Moreover, he argues that if leadership is ever going to “become adept enough to be able to speak from within that tradition instead of outside it,” they will need to be open to the enchantment, to the sacramental consciousness and wonder.⁶³

The term ‘sacrament’ is often defined as an outward sign of God’s invisible grace. While this statement rolls off the tongue, such familiarity to this language can render us numb to its significance and meaning. Feminist theologian Mary Hunt’s suggests a profound dynamism residing in the sacramental imagination. She explains that

⁶³ Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*, 180.

to sacramentalize is to pay attention. It is what a community does when it names and claims ordinary human experiences as holy, connecting them with history and propelling them into the future...It is simply taking time to attend to the people around us, to see in real lives (not in novels nor in Scripture) the stuff of human existence: birth, pain, growth, bonding, breakup, loss, friendship, and to recognize it as such. This is what sacraments are for. They are concrete experiences with food and touch, dance and drink, prayer and silence, affirmation and music. Think of a good dinner party. What could be holier? How one-dimensional much of what passes for sacraments in church is by comparison.⁶⁴

Hunt places the power directly in the hands of laity. One must simply ‘pay attention’ to sacramentalize. This means a radical redirection of the energy that has sought to centralize and arguably outsource the duty and privilege of the baptized. In this passage, Hunt dispels the binary thinking that has led to so much dangerous theology. By bringing embodiment into focus, she blurs these lines which have historically inspired isolation and self-doubt. When our daily lives are not seen as the holy sites they are, then they are shoved off into the land of the profane. In this way, to sacramentalize is to reject the cultures that have kept us apart from one another and apart from seeing, feeling, tasting, and delighting in the sacred which surrounds us. In his powerful essay “Sacraments”, Andre Dubus refers to this kind of living as a ‘receptive condition’.⁶⁵ He describes the act of making sandwiches for his daughters as a sacramental act. Each muscle movement needed to open the drawer, obtain a plastic bag, the curl of the knife spreading the mayonnaise, are all part of a grander dance that is an embodiment of

⁶⁴ Mary Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A feminist theology of friendship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 117.

⁶⁵ Andre Dubus, “Sacraments” in *Signatures of Grace: Catholic writers on the Sacraments*, ed. Thomas Grady and Paula Huston (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 222.

sacrament. His expression of love to his children is something they will consume—embodying the Eucharist in action and intention. Hunt and Dubus emphasize that we are only able to truly encounter and appreciate these sacraments if we have cultivated an inner landscape that is ‘oriented’ towards the holy. This receptive condition is a way of thinking and being in the world. It is preparing oneself to ‘pay attention’, fostering a spirit of hospitality, generosity, and innovative imaginings.

A few years ago, a young alumni named returned to campus to speak with students about her vocation as a community advocate. The most powerful part of our evening together, however, was her impromptu reflection on her and her friend’s weekly ritual as students at Tufts. In the fall of their sophomore year, these two women began meeting for coffee after class each Friday. It started organically as a co-caffeination project of convenience but they quickly found their friendship deepen. Those long conversations nourished them for the week and they committed to showing up for one another every Friday for the next three years. Sitting over coffee with a stranger-turned-friend was a sacramental encounter for these young women. It was transformative—the holy breaking through the space between them as they paid close attention to the person and world before them, working hard to truly *see* one another. These two women were open to the spirit of spontaneity. They were open to one another and open to the process of learning to listen. Eight years after their initial meeting, they shared that table once again on the eve of their five-year reunion. They booked their flights into Boston with the summer hours of the café in mind, which was, in essence, an expression of reverence—their time together was sacred, that space was sacred. They did not allow fear of being

known to keep them from this profoundly formative and meaningful connection. They opened themselves up to vulnerability and to truly being seen.

Watching this alumna tell the story of her friendship was yet another extension of the sacrament. Current students eagerly listened to how she framed as holy something that seemed so ordinary—getting coffee with a friend. The sanctuary she spoke of was a place so familiar to them all, making it that much more powerful. This moment of testimony stretched the imaginations of students present. For those who had never thought in this way, she offered a pathway into another way of being. Sometimes an imagination problem just needs a spark of disruption to wake us up to the spirit and to help us cultivate an internal ‘receptive condition’.

One Sunday a few years ago, I witnessed one such ‘receptive condition’ grow before my eyes. Due to a scheduling mix-up, we learned last minute that we would not have a priest for our 5 PM Sunday mass. At 4:58 PM, I spoke with the choir and we shifted the hymns for a liturgy of the word. Having had this happen in the past, I knew that while it was disappointing and indeed a little stressful in the short term, such evenings were consistently rich, teachable and transformative moments. On this particular night, a young woman named Rebecca was in the congregation. She was from a religiously conservative family in Florida and I could see that she was a little deflated by the absence of the priest. At the end of the liturgy, however, she approached me beaming with energy and excitement. This young woman gushed about how powerful it was to gather around word and song to pray with one another. She added, “of course, I came for the Eucharist, but this was awesome. Different but awesome.” In those words, I

hear so much of the story of American Catholic laity. She was hungry for the Eucharist but was surprised to learn that she was hungry for something else as well. Rebecca was always so present to the celebration of the paschal mystery but she had never experienced a liturgy of the word. She and her friends used to sit in a row, shoulder to shoulder in the choir loft, bobbing their heads, holding hands, and dancing as we sang the Lord's Prayer. But this experience opened her up to different ways of encountering the holy through sacrament and community. Not just the Eucharist, but the act of being together, witnessing to one another and trusting the spirit.

These three women teach us that there is more to being an observant Catholic than simply attending mass as a consumer—taking in Sacraments in a transactional way. There are opportunities throughout our day for deep and meaningful connection and they are holy. The disruption of that Sunday evening and those long hours at the coffee shop are reminders that together we are the Body of Christ—not just when we stand in the communion line. Sometimes the way laity relate to the Eucharist eclipses this reality. There has been so much focus on the seven Sacraments that many lay folks could stand to nourish their everyday sacramental consciousness. Laity are surrounded by critical opportunities for deep connection and sadly they are not always encountering them as the God's invisible grace breaking through. Non-liturgical sacramental encounters have the potential of deepening our appreciation for and understanding of the official seven Sacraments. When these elements of our lives are in conversation with one another, we grow in faith—rejecting the dualistic thinking that separates these worlds. Binaries breed

isolation and bi-furcation of self: sacred/profane, religious/secular, lay/clergy.⁶⁶ When these elements of our life are instead in conversation with one another, mutually informing and shaping one another, they are (we are) less alone, less isolated. We are more whole—as individuals and as the Body of Christ.

The transactional nature of what some scholars have called the fetishization of the Sacraments has drained laity of the imaginative. In so doing, we have created a culture wherein the call to be in relationship has been downgraded. The bi-furcation of self (religious/secular) and the bi-furcation of the baptized (lay/clerical) has mirrored a greater bi-furcation in the Body of Christ. Loneliness hurts us all, not just those who are suffering from the pangs of isolation. As Paul notes in his first letter to the Corinthians, “if one part suffers every part suffers with it; if one part is honored every part rejoices in it” (1 Cor. 12:26 NRSV). As Christians and as Catholics, the current loneliness epidemic has deep ramifications. The following chapter will explore how the tradition expresses this call to relationship.

⁶⁶ Chapter Four offers a more in-depth exploration of the lay/clergy binary and how we might shed this terminology as a means to embody light, justice and the spirit of baptism.

CHAPTER THREE: THE CHRISTIAN CALL OF RELATIONSHIP

Trinitarian Christianity is rooted in the dynamism, movement, and right relation of the fellowship of the three Persons of the divine—God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit/God the Creator, God the Incarnate and God the Holy Spirit/Imago Dei, Imago Christi, Imago Spiritus.⁶⁷ I employ ‘Person’ in the spirit of Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff who defines Person or the Greek *hypostasis* (*divine person*) as “that which is distinct in God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; the individuality of each Person who simultaneously exists in itself and in eternal communion with the other two.”⁶⁸ Concurrent distinction and interdependence is key to appreciating the implications for our lives. The triune God is social. The triune God is a community, interdependence itself and because we are made in God’s image, we too are social, communal, and interdependent. The Trinity, for all its centrality, is so rarely drawn upon and explored in meaningful, creative, or joyful ways. Perhaps it is overwhelming—the paradox and the mystery. Its complexity means that most language used to describe its nature diminishes or limits it in unorthodox ways. The Trinity can

⁶⁷ I use follow “The Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit” with “God the Creator, God the Incarnate, and God the Holy Spirit” and “Imago Dei, Imago Christi, Imago Spiritus” to give witness to the feminist consciousness. These two other expressions of the Trinity reject the male dominating imagery of the former, seeking to embody a more wholistic and non-gendered tone that proactively affirms the humanity of women. Elizabeth Johnson quotes Peter Hodgson to convey the danger and absurdity associated with employing the male language in an uncritical way, “It is so obviously misleading to think of God as a fraternity of male beings who are begetting, spiraling, and proceeding from one another that is best to drop this language entirely.” Cited in Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Herder & Herder Book, 2005), 193.

⁶⁸ Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2000), 123.

feel so elusive, even as it grounds our every act of worship and prayer. As Catholics, we enter sacred spaces blessing our bodies with the three Persons. Stations of Holy Water wait for us at the threshold, beckoning us to dip our fingers. We interrupt the surface of the water, and marking our bodies with the same substance used by countless others to mark theirs. When we make the sign of the cross, we touch our head, chest, and shoulders. It is called “the sign of the cross” but by enacting this ritual, we make physical what is ultimately more of a triangle than a cross. Early Christians began this practice without speaking aloud the Persons of the Trinity. Over time, however, this practice has evolved and shifted. The act of crossing oneself transposes the reality and profundity of the three Persons onto our body. It points towards the deep interdependent relationship between our minds, hearts, and spirits, marking us with a communal identity that spans centuries. We are connected to those who have come before us and to those who live across the world. This interconnection reflects something deeper about the nature of God.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a subset of the fullness of our understanding of divinity, but the Trinity is also understood through its direct revelation in history. As Leonardo Boff writes, “we must always distinguish between the reality of the Trinity and the Doctrine of the Trinity...the Trinity is not revealed as a doctrine but as a practice: in the deeds and words of Jesus and in the actions of the Holy Spirit in the world and in the people.”⁶⁹ I use Boff as a guidepost for this chapter, bringing practice and doctrine into conversation with one another. This chapter comes in two parts. Part one engages with the Trinity. I continue to dwell in the body, offering a theopoetic reflection on the way

⁶⁹ Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 17.

Catholics have woven this ritualized expression of the mystery into our daily lives. I then shift to the doctrine itself, drawing upon feminist and liberation theologians whose readings of the Trinity offer new ways of being community and being church. In part two, I consider the social implications of such theology and practice, looking at how the Trinity may spiritually enrich those struggling with disconnection and loneliness. I draw upon the stories of my congregation at Tufts University. In this conversation, I explore a particular kind of relationship, namely, friendship. I examine historical threads of friendship within monastic traditions and argue that sacramental friendship reflects back the truth of the Trinity, making God's grace visible.

Head and Shoulders: A Theopoetic of the Holy Trinity

The act of crossing oneself is itself a site for theological wisdom and deep reflection. To focus on this embodied expression of trinitarian theology, we are reminded of the earliest Jesus followers who were experiencing God in and between one another. Their encounters with the Holy were wondrous, mysterious, and sometimes terrifying. These human beings sought to give words to such experiences and employed symbols to more effectively communicate their stories. Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson succinctly expresses this ongoing relationship between human experience and church teaching. As if to offer a reality check on parts of the tradition that we now somewhat take for granted, Johnson writes, “the point of all these theological constructions is to give voice to fragmentary saving experiences as experiences of God, in the living tradition of the Christian story.”⁷⁰ Johnson's words remind us that the story

⁷⁰ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 222.

is ever unfolding within each of us, in our bodies, in our relationships—our joys and our sufferings. Looking back upon early Christians, we may be surprised to learn that it was not until the council of Nicaea in the fourth century that the Trinity was formally written into doctrine, as envisioned and grounded by Augustine. Early references to the act of imposing crosses upon one's body teach us that Christians used their bodies to mark the reality of the Holy Trinity. Well before scribes, councils, and heresies solidified a doctrine, the power of beholding and embodying the Trinity took precedence. In many ways, writing about this theology is to attempt to pin it down—something that conflicts with the inherent movement and creativity most associated with the Trinity. I shift now to reflection on what it looks like and feels like when we mark our bodies with this foundational and incarnational truth of our tradition.

Crossing oneself is as rich as it is pervasive. Some Catholics think of it as an intersection point of Jesus' commandments: the vertical motion being the love of God and the horizontal line, the love of neighbor. These lines mark the meeting of our breastplate, just above our hearts. It is a moment of cruciform intersection—the tolling of a bell that rings within and throughout the Body of Christ and it makes visible the invisible reality of God's life in us. This everyday act calls to the more formalized rituals of the Official Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, and Anointing wherein a small cross is drawn upon the forehead by the celebrant (and on the hands as well in the Anointing). When it comes to these Sacraments, the celebrant may speak aloud different words, conveying a slightly different meaning, but the thread is there—there is a deep commitment to tracing the cross and thus, the Trinity, on the body. It is a common

practice of lay people to bless their children each night or friends heading out on a journey with the sign of the cross on their foreheads. Priests can also be seen blessings entire assemblies with a large gestured cross in the air before them—marking the Body of Christ. When we prepare ourselves for the Gospel in liturgy, three small crosses come into conversation with one another as we draw them upon our head, our lips, and hearts. In doing so, we pray that God may open our minds to hear the Word, our lips to proclaim the Word, and our hearts to receive the Word. These practices serve as constant reminders for ourselves—and our bodies—that the triune God is actively at work, inscribed upon us, holding us, and always in motion in and between us.

Tertullian, a church father of the third century, famously described the integration of the sign of the cross into the daily lives of early Christians. He said, “in all our travels and movements, in all our coming and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupieth us, we mark our forehead with the sign of the cross.”⁷¹ Tertullian’s words offer a glimpse into another time when the practice was woven into the seemingly mundane threshold moments of the day. The cross was drawn upon the body in moments of pause and moments of movement, in the caring for one’s body but also in the way we exchange our time for money. He was speaking of an orientation towards the Trinity, an orientation towards sacrament within the common and unspectacular ticks of the day. These words

⁷¹ Tertullian, *De Corona Militis*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwell in *Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. III. 3. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0304.htm>.

suggest a fundamental integration of faith into life, reflecting the proverbial seamless garment. The practice has since shifted from a forehead cross to a head/heart/shoulders action. Most contemporary American Catholics only cross themselves before prayer or when entering a sanctuary. Tertullian describes a theology that was not yet doctrine but was nevertheless a central and defining element of lived religion. From this snapshot, we see early Christians threading their days with ‘disruptive’ action. I use the word ‘disruption’ to convey the very real rupture of consciousness and rift of physical space that goes into drawing a cross upon one’s forehead throughout the day. It takes a continuous sacramental consciousness to engage the rhythms of the day with this kind of intentionality.

This passage from Tertullian goes on to capture some of the wisdom of what we know call today lived religion. When we ask what religion looks like, we are taking care to notice how the day-to-day actions, adjustments, and choreography of the faithful communicate an identity and meaning making process. Lived religion lifts up the lives of the faithful as sites for study and exploration. In the words of Tertullian,

If, for these and other such rules, you insist upon having positive Scripture injection, you will find none. Tradition will be held forth to you as the originator of them, custom as their strengthener, and faith as their observer. That reason will support tradition, and custom, and faith, you will either yourself perceive, or learn from someone who has.”⁷²

The relationship between tradition, custom, and faith is an ongoing negotiation. If we are observing the way faith is lived out in our world, then we will be ‘perceiving’ the shifts that come with time and difference of context. There is an agility in this way of

⁷² Tertullian, *De Corona Militis*, 4.

encountering tradition—perhaps an agility Tertullian may have resisted—but by reflecting upon the very acts, movements and shapes of the day, we are drawing into a deeper and more meaningful relationship to faith.

The Trinity is, of course, a mystery but Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr offers an exciting access point. In his book *The Divine Dance*, Rohr re-centers our relationship to mystery. He writes that it is not that we cannot understand the mystery, but that we are forever understanding the mystery. As regards the Trinity, he says, “it is something that you can *endlessly understand!* There is no point at which you can say, ‘I’ve got it.’ Always and forever the mystery *gets you!*”⁷³ For Rohr, the ambiguity, the constant shifting and ongoing experiences of awe, clarity, and confusion are what define the Trinity. His gracious and spacious reading of our practical relationship to the Trinity grounds and affirms our diverse experiences, creating opportunities for mystery and spiritual journey to mutually inform one another. This breathe makes it possible to confront our own growing and changing relationship to the doctrine and practice. It allows for complication and continual re-discovery. It allows for our lives—our joys, sufferings, and stories—to define and redefine our understanding of the mystery, which is itself an acceptance and celebration of its deep-seated relationality. When ongoing revelation speaks to us in terms and symbols we understand, we are more likely to acknowledge vulnerability and all that we do not know. This real-time humility creates space to admit that we do not know it all and to take comfort in that fact!

⁷³ Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016), 27. Italics author’s.

Rohr's spacious framing of the 'forever understanding' of the mystery comes in handy when reckoning with some of the deeply problematic and shameful ways this element of the tradition has been instrumentalized to instill fear and sanction violence. Despite being a central statement of interdependence and self-giving love, the Trinity has and continues to be used as a weapon and gatekeeper. In the middle ages, crusaders attacked Jews and Muslims with the doctrine of the Trinity, demanding adherence to or belief in it. In essence, the Trinity served as the ultimate axis in the fate of Jews and Muslims—conversion or death. It was a symbolic and literal threat to human lives and to God's diverse creation. When we cross ourselves today, we bring with us this deeply painful history. Within the tradition, the Trinity has been used as an impossible litmus test. Even when not wielded as viciously as in the crusades, it has functioned as an accusatory subtext within Catholicism—a cause for much anxiety, fear, and self-doubt. "Do you really understand the Trinity?" This of course is the ultimate trick question. As the deepest mystery, who could possibly say yes? But at the same time, how many of us have the courage to say no?

The Dance of the Trinity

The term *perichoresis* is defined as being-in-one-another, "permeation without confusion".⁷⁴ It shares the same root as the word choreography. The term is thought to have been first used by Gregory of Nazianzus, the fourth century Archbishop of Constantinople, as a means to capture the dynamism of Jesus as fully human and fully divine. In the years that followed, this term would be employed in trinitarian theology as

⁷⁴ Catherine Mowley LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 269.

regards the three Persons. Theologians have struggled to wrestle this term into a single definition finding greater comfort and precision in the use of metaphor to convey its significance. Closest to capturing the creative movement and mutuality of the Trinity, many have relied upon the image of the divine dance. Catholic feminist theologian Catherine LaCugna observes that

choreography suggests the partnership of movement, symmetrical but not redundant, as each dancer expresses and at the same time fulfills him/herself toward the other. In interaction and inter-course, the dancers (and the observers) experience one fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching. There are neither leaders nor followers in the divine dance, only an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again...The image of the dance forbids us to think of God as solitary.”⁷⁵

The single motion suggests timelessness and a seamless primordial creative energy. In our attempts to behold the divine dance, we must stretch our imaginations. With no leader or follower, no ending and no beginning, the choreography of the Trinity is antithetical to the nature of our society and our church the way it exists in this world. It does not operate with the limitations of our world and so we are challenged to expand ourselves—opening the contours of our inner landscape to grow in imaginative capacity. LaCugna’s imagery plants the seeds for the Catholic imaginary and reminds us of the deeply countercultural nature of Jesus and his message. We should not be surprised that the whole of the three Persons mirrors the spirit of inversion and innovation preached by the Incarnate (Jesus). The divine dance is rhythm itself and cyclical in nature. The dissolution of any distinction between dancer and observer implicates all of creation in this divine dance. Such a powerful image reflects the ongoing invitation to be in a state of greater wakefulness. The

⁷⁵ LaCugna, *God for Us*, 272.

dance is ongoing, with no beginning or ending. That which can change, however, is us and our relationship to such consciousness.

Feminist theologian Carter Heyward uses the term ‘mutual relation’ to speak to the nature of God and how Christians are called to be in this world. While I explore Heyward’s theology of mutual relation and God as power more thoroughly in Chapter 4, it is worth noting here that her reflections on the Trinity reiterate this sense of possibility and expansion. Perichoresis challenges us to leave behind our very human desire for the predictable. Instead, we are called to broaden and refine our religious imagination. She argues that “God as Trinity means that whatever is Sacred is relational, never self-absorbed; always moving beyond itself to meet the new, the other, the different, never set in its ways or stuck on itself as the only way.”⁷⁶ The interplay between sameness and difference, unity and multiplicity is magnified in Heyward’s words as she shifts the gaze outward into the space between. Movement itself and specifically movement towards difference in the spirit of relationality is the essence of trinitarian living. Moreover, she is keen to address stagnation as sin. Holding on to one way of being is rejecting the dynamism of the Trinity and thus turning away from God. For Heyward, innovation guided by mutual relation is itself holiness and wholeness.

Signpost Trinity

In her landmark text *God for Us*, LaCugna breathes life into the history and theology of the doctrine of the Trinity. She looks deeply at the practical applications of this theology for a faithful Christian life and acknowledges the way the Trinity has been

⁷⁶ Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus from Those Who are Right: Rethinking What it means to be Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 73.

locked away as an abstraction, far from the reach of everyday baptized folks. Her work is an act of reorientation and resurrection. She writes, “the doctrine of the Trinity is not a theory about the essence of God conceived apart from the actual self-giving of God in the economy of salvation, but the essence of God revealed and bestowed in the person of Christ and in the permanent presence of the Spirit.”⁷⁷ In this single sentence, LaCugna invites us to shake off the old and unrelatable reading of the Trinity and to enter into a physical and personal experience of the holy. She rejects the layers of translation and distance that come with conceiving of the Trinity as simply the ‘theory of the essence of God’ and grounds it instead in action. It is the essence ‘revealed’ and bestowed’. She strips away the abstraction and unrelatability and replaces it within the context of the ‘person of Christ’ and our own persons as we engage with the Spirit’s ‘permanent presence.’ LaCugna empowers the baptized to draw upon their lives, Christ in their lives, the Spirit in their lives, to break open the mystery of God. She goes on to liken the Trinity to a ‘signpost’.⁷⁸ Like any signpost, the Trinity points ‘beyond itself’ to reveal a path, a way. This image stands in stark contrast to how the Trinity’s has been employed as a gatekeeper. Far from locking folks away or scaring them with imposing posturing, LaCugna’s ‘Signpost Trinity’ serves as a tool within the landscape. Even with all the incomprehensibility, the sign remains, pointing ‘beyond itself to the mystery of God who is alive and whose ongoing relationship with creation and persons cannot be frozen or

⁷⁷ LaCugna, *God for Us*, 334.

⁷⁸ LaCugna, *God for Us*, 321.

fixed in time.”⁷⁹ We may not be able to understand it but we feel it, we experience it in our bodies, and in the movement of our lives. The signpost, like a lighthouse, provides an orientation—it is in our midst whether we choose (or are able) to observe this reality. Whether we adjust accordingly or create the conditions to see more clearly, is another question entirely.

Friendship

In an article that was published just a year after *God for Us*, LaCugna emphasizes this spirit of accessibility and authenticity. She writes,

The central theme of all trinitarian theology is relationship: God’s relationship with us, our relationship with one another. The doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract conceptual paradox about God’s inner life, or a mathematical puzzle of the ‘one in three.’ The doctrine of the Trinity is in fact the most practical of all doctrines. Among other things, it helps us articulate our understanding of the gospel’s demands: how personal conversion is related to social transformation; what constitutes ‘right relationship’ within the Christian community and in society at large.⁸⁰

LaCugna’s bold insistence that the Trinity is ‘the most practical of all doctrines’ deserves our attention. It is an invitation to see how our day-to-day lives may help elucidate the trinitarian dynamism that surrounds us but it also a challenge. What does it mean to bring the doctrine of the Trinity into our lives and to allow it to shape our days? On one level, we are already doing this work as we cross ourselves, but if we are to heighten our consciousness of what it means to mark our bodies with God’s relationality, then we may find more entry points for engaging meaningfully with this doctrine. There are real life

⁷⁹ LaCugna, *God for Us*, 321.

⁸⁰ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “The Practical Trinity,” *The Christian Century* (July 15-22, 1992): 681.

on-the-ground social implications for embracing the ongoing co-creative, self-giving, radically interdependent nature of the Trinity. One way of building this signpost into our lives is by reflecting theologically on moments of connection already unfolding in our lives. These sites of wisdom offer us a deeply personal and relatable way of visualizing the shape of God's grace. We may even experience physiological changes as we recall those encounters of wonder and awe. Sometimes the richest tidbits come when we least expect.

I first met Michael when he arrived to campus as a perspective student. He and his family extended their visit to campus to attend our 10 PM mass. In August of that next year, his parents and younger siblings sent him forth with excitement and a bit of trepidation. An accomplished student, his Autism Spectrum Disorder made it hard to connect socially with others. Each week, he would come to chapel fifteen minutes early, pour himself a cup of water and we would chat about our weeks. I got to know Michael over the years during these weekly inventory sessions. I learned about his love of table top gaming and baking. Five years after our first meeting, in the days leading up to Commencement Weekend, I gathered with graduating students to celebrate and reflect. I was concerned that Michael might struggle at this scene—one long picnic table, but my worries were quickly assuaged. Once he sat down, Michael immediately engaged with Rory, my six-month-old son who I had brought with me. Some of the young women cooed and smiled at him, but it was Michael, sitting right beside me, who took Rory out of my hands and immediately started bouncing him on his knee. Michael was a pro. As the oldest child in a large family, of course he was! I had never seen him smile so

continuously. His eyes brightened and his shoulders settled. It was magical the way Michael's anxiety melted away. This young man who ordinarily struggled to make eye contact was locking eyes with Rory, making silly faces and laughing with delight. It was a moment of sacramental encounter. I witnessed a deep and holy connectedness in that instant. God revealed Godself and ever-presence in the divine dance between us. Luckily, I was awake enough to catch a glimpse.

It was a profound gift to see this side of Michael. It was in fact a revelation, a transformation, but not a transformation of Michael so much as a transformation of my perception and understanding of possibility. God's grace flowed through Michael's loving arms and full heart. God's grace poured through the spontaneous silly ditties he made up on the spot and sang for Rory. In that interaction, I was able to better see the *imago dei* of Michael as he witnessed the *imago dei* of my son. That space between us was a gift of surprise, abundance, and tenderness. It was a reminder that there is always so much more than we can fathom. We are called to be in relationship. As with this everyday moment in the pizza place, something profound happens when we are connected to one another—and if we are oriented towards the sacred—we may even see God revealing Godself in ordinary moments of connection like this one.

It is not uncommon for Christians and Catholics to consider the Holy Spirit as beneath the Father and Son, like an afterthought or a lesser body. It is, after all, the last thing we say when we cross ourselves and if we are hierarchically minded, we may interpret beginning with the Father and ending with the Spirit a kind of implicit statement of import. For many, the Holy Spirit is seen as less concrete as the first two Persons and

therefore harder to grasp. In 1411, the Council of Florence addressed this dangerous misunderstanding echoing Augustine's famous declaration of parity in this statement on *Perichoresis* (or the interpenetration of the three Persons): "So great is the equality in this Trinity that not only is the Father not greater than the Son in that which pertains to the divinity, but neither are the Father and the Son anything greater than the Holy Spirit, nor is each person simply anything less than the Trinity itself."⁸¹ This statement of the radical equality of the three Persons has served as the foundation for a liberating theology of the Trinity. Both liberation theologians and feminist theologians have drawn upon this central aspect of the Trinity to call for a new way of being in the world, a new and more just way of being human beings on this planet. As Boff explains, "The intention of Christians to create an egalitarian society, built on mechanisms of participation by all and respectful of differences, while keeping them from becoming inequalities, is grounded in the equal dignity of the three divine Persons, in their simultaneity, and in their loving shared existence."⁸² By this logic, Catholic Social Teaching comes from the doctrine of the Trinity. As does every effort for justice. The inversion of hierarchy means disrupting the status quo which prefers some remain on the margins while others hoard power at the center. All of it comes from the Trinity and a deep understanding of radical interdependence. The honoring of human dignity reflects the divine dance of creativity and compassion, the interpenetration and permeation of holiness in and between the three Persons and in and between all of creation.

⁸¹ Cited by LaCugna, *God for Us*, 96.

⁸² Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 91.

In reflecting on this statement from the Council of Florence, Boff writes that “the Blessed Trinity is thus a mystery of inclusion. Such inclusion prevents us from understanding one Person without the others.”⁸³ Leaning into this ‘mystery of inclusion’, I wonder how such a statement invites us to consider the application to human persons as well. I think back to Michael and Rory. That definitive moment of connection changed them and indeed changed me. The *imago dei* in Michael and I and everyone at the table shedding light on the web of existence. I cannot fully understand Michael or myself or Rory without understanding each of us and all who have formed us—those we know and those we do not. That day at the pizza place, the rupture of clarity, the spontaneous beauty of a deep joyous connection, it was all dependent upon the co-creative spirit of that encounter. Michael held a posture towards connection and mutual relation. He was oriented towards Rory, towards playful delight, and thus towards God between us.

LaCugna argues that the ‘only appropriate response to the mystery of God revealed in the economy is adoration.’⁸⁴ In the moment, I was awash with the spontaneity and beauty and then I took a photo them—Michael holding Rory under his arms and the two of them beaming with the kind of smiles that transform the whole face. This was the only photo I took of the gathering that day and I return to it quite often. Each time, I am moved to tears as I am met again with the revelation of Michael’s eyes—steady, full of brightness, staring into the camera. Through this medium of technology, though it might

⁸³ Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 15.

⁸⁴ LaCugna, “The Practical Trinity,” 321-322. LaCugna’s use of the term ‘economy’ pertains to her greater thesis around the economics of the Trinity and the need to understand the Trinity in terms of salvation.

be a kind of translation, I am afforded a sacramental encounter, an opportunity for adoration.⁸⁵ If we are to embrace the Trinity as a mystery of inclusion—unfolding around us, ready to be adored—how might we reorient ourselves to make room for all that beholding? How might spiritual practice and sacramental consciousness help make such adoration possible? And how might being in relationship—intentional, joy-filled, gritty relationship—be a means by which to adore or behold God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit/God the Creator, God the Incarnation, and God the Holy Spirit/Imago Dei, Imago Christi, Imago Spiritus?

Friends with God, Friends with Jesus

Throughout Christian literature, the relationship between God and humanity is often framed as a friendship. Augustine and others, however, take issue with this image as it suggests a kind of equality that they see as incongruous with the philosophical definition of divinity which transcends humanity in every way. For feminist theologians, embracing God as friend has served to rescue theology from the limitations of patriarchal language and symbol. In her discussion on feminist reflections of God, feminist theologian and Roman Catholic sister Anne Carr illustrates the disruptive and liberating

⁸⁵ Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 10. Mary Elizabeth Moore unpacks the loaded moments of connection wherein the holy breaks through. She approaches sacramental theology from the lens of her vocation as a teacher, but her attention to consciousness building around sacramental imagination is something I will continue to return to. Moore defines sacraments as “the conveyance of God’s grace through signs in creation for the sanctification of human beings and the well-being of all God’s creation.” Her definition bears dynamism and movement. As a Catholic hoping to inspire a more creative sacramental consciousness in Catholic students, I find her definition invigorating. It draws upon much the same language and communicates the same essence, but it is free of the stock phrases which desensitize us to the radical, profound, and ubiquitous nature of sacraments.

potential of embracing God as friend. She argues that this image applies specifically to the experience of women who have historically been systematically stripped of their agency and denied relatable image of the divine. She writes, “a biblical interpretation of God from the perspective of the experience of women shows that this favored metaphor is firmly grounded in the incarnational tradition as a disclosure of the character of God who desires relationship, even the relationship of equality that is friendship.”⁸⁶ Carr brings to light the way this more relational image of God speaks to women who historically have not seem themselves reflected in the patriarchal language and symbol of the divine in Christianity. It is worth noting that the positionality of Carr, and other folks on the margins, is quite different from Augustine. Oppressed peoples do not need more messages of their inferiority. The spark of conversion and affirmation comes from being seen as a whole person and being delivered from that experience of denigration. While Carr’s contemporary voice draws upon women’s experience and feminist theology as a liberation theology, many men—and specially monks—throughout Christian intellectual history have also connected deeply to this image of God as friendship and friendship with God. This imagery speaks to both men and women, even if it might serve a multitude of functions for people in diverse social locations.

References to the friendship between Jesus and humanity should come as no surprise. After all, Jesus gave himself to his friends. The eucharistic meal is one shared with friends. Practical theologian Liz Carmichael even refers to Jesus as “divine

⁸⁶ Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988), 150.

friendship incarnate.”⁸⁷ The poetic longing in the writings of monastics like Julian of Norwich, Marguerite Porete, Francis of Assisi, speaks to this foundational element of the story—their voices betray an intense desire for intimacy with Jesus. The popular contemporary Christian culture of Jesus-is-my-friend acquired its own homage and parody in Kevin Smith’s 1999 film *Dogma*. Smith gave this trope a Catholic twist as his character Cardinal Glick (played by George Carlin) dispenses with the doom and gloom of the crucifix, replacing it with a new icon, “The Buddy Christ”. This Jesus reveals his sacred heart and flexed muscles, offering an affirming wink, a thumbs up, and pointing directly at us – His witnesses. Buddy Christ’s hand gestures, gym body, and facial expression reflect back to us the moment of the late 1990’s, making the icon another contextual expression of Liz Carmichael’s characterization of “divine friendship incarnate.”⁸⁸ Two decades after the release of the film, figurines and bobbleheads

⁸⁷ Liz Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 193.

⁸⁸ As Kevin Smith noted in a 1999 interview, humanizing Jesus is what makes him relatable. For Smith, it was imagining Jesus with friends that took this connection to a new more meaningful level. Kevin Smith, “My Buddy Christ,” *The Guardian*, December 9, 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/1999/dec/10/culture.features1>. One of Smith’s teachers, Sister Theresa, offered a refreshing version of the Jesus story. For Smith, this reimagining of Jesus was central to arriving at any kind of authenticity in faith. In his words, “Suddenly Christ was also a guy. And a guy with friends. And a guy with friends who wasn’t above taking the piss out of them once in a while. Christ was a walking, talking dude...who just also happened to be the Son of Man. And before He would offer Himself up as the sacrificial Lamb, He ate, slept, breathed ran, played, thought, felt, loved, wept, spoke, smiled, probably farted and laughed (maybe even after He farted—particularly when His friends were around.) Here was a Christ I could wrap my head around. Here was a Christ I could actually endeavor to be like. Here was a Christ that spoke to me, and that was something I wanted to share with pother people. (cited by Steve Nolan, “Buddy Christ and Jesus Action Figure: Contemporary (ab)use of the Christ Image,” *Culture and Religion* 7, no. 3 (November 2006): 318.

continue to make this icon a staple in the world of Christian kitsch. Kevin Smith, the writer and director of *Dogma*, inscribed the Buddy Christ upon our modern landscape and popular culture, leaving an indelible mark of this accessible and ‘more relatable’ Jesus. The Buddy Christ invokes the tradition of sacramental devotionals. Upon bookshelves and windowsills, its irony reflects the multiple meanings within and throughout all sacramental life. It is polyvalent and always disruptive to the physical space and context.

Early Christians invoked the language of family—brothers and sisters—but there was a subversive element to this imagery as it redefined family, pushing back on the cultural norms that drew hard lines of insiders and outsiders. Friendship and the emphasis on creating new and often socially transgressive friendships was what made Jesus so threatening. Unlike biological family relationships which are blood bound and obligation bound, friendships are elected—chosen. Friendship with God or God as friend reflects a kind of ‘chosenness’. Jesus was vilified for being ‘friends with sinners and tax collectors.’ (LK 7:24, NRSV) His choice of friends magnified his message of radical love and inclusivity. It was the very fact that he chose to be with the outcasts of society that made him so dangerous. He threatened the status quo. For those of us who have ever felt on the margins, we know that discovering an identity in chosenness means feeling seen, understood, worthy just as we are. Chosenness is not a declaration of superiority, rather, it is a statement of dignity and personal/collective mission—or, co-mission.

In her pioneering work *Models of God*, eco-feminist theologian Sallie McFague explores God as Friend. She turns away from the classical understanding of friendship as

elitist and exclusionary and instead focusses her energy on the mutuality, reciprocity and common concern of friendship. She defines friendship as the “free, reciprocal, trustful bonding of persons committed to a common vision.”⁸⁹ With this understanding, she contrasts the side-by-side intimacy of friends with the face-to-face eye gazing of lovers. She argues that friends are less myopic than lovers whose attention can be so focused on their beloved that the world fades away. The commitment of friends to a common interest brings McFague to a place of praxis. She writes,

if God is the friend of the world, the one committed to it, who can be trusted never to betray it, who not only likes the world but has a vision for its well-being, then we are the special part of the body—the imago dei—are invited as friends of the Friend of the world to join in that vision and work for its fulfillment. God as lover of the world gave us the vision that God finds the world valuable and desires its wounds healed and its creatures free; God as friend asks us, as adults, to become associated in that world.⁹⁰

McFague rescues friendship from a foolish and superficial fate—being exclusively associated with children. These words were published in 1987, and sadly, as the loneliness literature reflects, we need this message even more today! Friends are not simply for when we are children. Friendships are to be honed and worked upon, explored and embraced as the beautiful, complex, and often mysterious connections that they are. McFague complicates our understanding of friendship, adding texture and maturity by universalizing the call to action. God as friend does not refer to simply a relationship between God and the individual. Rather, this friendship involves all those who love the

⁸⁹ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 171.

⁹⁰ McFague, *Models of God*, 165.

world. If we are friends of the world—friends of all of creation—than we are bound by the interdependence of our identity to act with fierceness, compassion, and conscience.

Friendship among Human Beings

The fourth century Bishop of Milan and Doctor of the Church, St. Ambrose wrote the first text on Christian friendship. He mused,

What is a friend, in fact, but a partner in love? You unite your inner-most being to his, you join your spirit to his, you blend so thoroughly with him that your aim is to be no loner two but one. You entrust yourself to him as to another self; you fear nothing from him; and you do not ask anything dishonourable from him for your own ends.⁹¹

Ambrose was one of the first to reflect upon this particular relationship and deem it virtuous. He engaged with the nuances that distinguish friendship—free-willed and steeped in kindness—and looked to it to illuminate questions of faith and our relationship to the divine. Building upon this tradition of theological reflection on friendship, Aelred of Rievaulx, offered an extensive reflections on friendship nearly seven centuries later.

Aelred of Rievaulx was a prolific writer and he concluded his corpus at the end of his life with a dialogical exploration called *Spiritual Friendship*. He drew upon his experience serving as an abbot for two decades, considering the practical questions that defined his time living in community. For Aelred, spiritual friendship was not just a central element of Christian life but it is necessary for spiritual awareness. He wrote from the context of his ministry as a spiritual leader and as someone who knew that there are severe costs to unhealthy relationships. Aelred, however, was most concerned with

⁹¹ Cited by Carmichael, *Friendship*, 48

honoring the spiritual richness that comes with healthy friendships. He chose to offer a nuanced approach rather than discouraging intimacy altogether. A bit of historical context helps us to better appreciate the radical nature of Aelred's theology and praxis. Within monastic communities, there had always been a level of suspicion around friendship. Superiors worried that 'emotional entanglements' with other members of the community or with folks outside the community could threaten the spiritual consciousness or devotion of the monk or nun.⁹² On another level, there were concerns that such a relationship could compromise the greater community. Because monastic spirituality was placed upon a pedestal for lay people, this message bled out into the world as well, discouraging laity from cultivating deep intimacies and vulnerabilities with others.

In *Spiritual Friendship*, Aelred frames three kinds of friendships—carnal, worldly, and spiritual. The first is associated with vice or lustful impulse. It is devoid of thoughtfulness and judgment. The second, worldly, has to do with greed and the desire to gain. It is not trustworthy in spirit as it depends upon iniquity and potential exploitation. By contrast, spiritual friendship is an expression of mutuality. It is the response to Jesus' call in the Gospel of John "to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." (JN 15:16-17, NRSV) In the verse preceding this new commandment to love one another, Jesus refers to the disciples as his friends: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (JN 15:15, NRSV) For Jesus, the spirit of

⁹² Carmichael, *Friendship*, 71.

friendship is the act of sharing—wisdom, wealth (in all the sense of the word), and mission. Jesus desires humanity to be in close proximity to him—physically, socially, and emotionally. He desires intimacy with his friends. This desire evokes the giddiness, anticipation, and delight that comes with meeting someone with whom we instantly connect. Likewise, it speaks to the wonder that comes with breaking down barriers after trudging through the social wilderness with someone who has challenged us in some way. Jesus teaches us that anticipation and desire around intimacy is holy and reflective of God’s nature. Aelred teaches us that being friends with one another is being friends with Jesus.

In the second book of *Spiritual Friendship*, Aelred is speaking with Walter, a monk in his community. Walter and his questions function as a way to open up the conversation and dig into the nitty gritty of relationships. He is a stand in for the reader. As he explains to his superior, Walter wants to open himself up to but is curious of what he will gain. He wants to know more about the ‘purposes and rewards’ of friendship. Aelred first humbles himself to the sheer magnitude of this challenge and then he unpacks the polyvalent profitability of friendship. He explains to Walter that

the wise man says ‘a friend is medicine for life.’ What a striking metaphor! No remedy is more powerful, effective, and distinctive in everything that fills this life than to have someone to share your every loss with compassion and your ever gain with congratulation. Hence, shoulder to shoulder, according to Paul, friends carry each other’s burdens, though they each bear their own bruises more lightheartedly than their friend’s. Thus friendship *by dividing and sharing makes prosperity more splendid and adversity more tolerable.*⁹³

⁹³Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, ed. Marsha L. Dutton, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 72-73. Italics editor’s.

For Aelred, friendships serve a real function. They offer tangible benefits. They make the light brighter, the gnarly thicket more bearable. A spiritual friend magnifies God's grace. A spiritual friend is an expression of God's presence on earth, the Holy Spirit in action in and between us. This passage shows Aelred's awareness of and deep appreciation for the critical role of the confidant on life's journey. They are a gift to and from God, expanding our capacity for life. Spiritual friendship is a verb, an unfolding of gifts, a beholding of holiness and tenderness. It is also a challenge to dig into the muckiness of life for a richer human experience. Moreover, we cannot reach a place of authenticity without embracing vulnerability.

While this above passage offers a systematic framing of the advantages of friendship, Aelred's final words explicitly incorporate Christ into the discourse. His expression of embodiment and powerful poeticism beckons us to engage with the sacramental imagination. The spiritual friend emboldens our experience of the Eucharist—bringing it out into the world of our relationships, thereby integrating Christ more fully into our daily lives. As regards orientating ourselves towards one another and thus Christ, Aelred writes,

sometimes suddenly, imperceptibly, affection melts into affection, and somehow touching the sweetness of Christ nearby, one begins to taste how dear he is and experience how sweet he is. Thus rising from that holy love with which a friend embraces a friend to that with which a friend embraces Christ, one may take the spiritual fruit of friendship fully and joyfully into the mouth, while looking forward to the abundance in the life to come.⁹⁴

Aelred makes explicit the connection between love of Christ and love of friend. Not only that, his evocative language brings us face-to-face with the embodied reality of our

⁹⁴ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 126.

existence. It is sensuous. We are sensuous. The call to savor the fruits of friendship on our tongues, is a call to open ourselves up to the holy, to the gifts of one another, to be transformed by the sacramental encounter. Our incarnational faith does not always engage the body and our sensuous existence with as much enthusiasm as I hear in Aelred's closing words, which makes it all the more prophetic. Aelred's enfleshing imagery reminds us that to behold God and all of creation, we are required to remain awake to the ways our bodies allow us to experience the holy.

Women Friends

A much overlooked and invisible dynamic in patriarchal culture, women's friendships have been places of profound intimacy and connectedness, often operating outside the purview of controlling structures. Women's relationships with other women are often both invisible and cause for suspicion. During my time as a campus minister at an all boy's Catholic preparatory school, I saw this dynamic take many shapes. For two years, three of the four campus ministers were women in their twenties, myself included. Should we ever be walking around campus together, colleagues would consistently tease us and accuse us of 'conspiring' in some way. In this hyper-masculine setting, we were at once a threat and small fry. Our relationship was borderline incomprehensible to some on the faculty and this made it seem conspiratorial and untrustworthy. There is something to this beautiful mystery, however. Historically, letter writing allowed women to embrace their own power and autonomy. Layers of vulnerability and transparency define this genre of writing. The gift of reading letters between women friends has shined light onto unguarded expressions of affection and deep sharing of the inner life. Lifelong

friendships allow for intimacies to grow and evolve over decades, truly revealing a companion whose appreciation for the winding paths and hair pin turns of life is unparalleled.

In the past few years, the term ‘emotional labor’ has gained traction. Once a way to understand elements of the wage gap, it is now employed in wider terms to refer to the caring, empathizing, and negotiating work that women often take on in the workplace and at home. This work is often invisible and rarely acknowledged through compensation. Assumptions around gender roles have led women and men to think of women as ideally suited for this kind of labor. Of course, such stereotyping diminishes men as much as it pigeonholes women, but the fact remains that the emotional labor of intimacy and connection remains on the backs of women. They serve as the front of emotional intimacy for their male partners and female friends. Men are often not taught the skills of emotional intimacy. Social norms pressure men to resist vulnerability, encouraging them to posture and project strength and stoicism. Such stuntedness is compounded by the desire to appear strong and independent, which for many translates to not asking for help. This dynamic creates particularly high stakes for men as they age. In the United Kingdom, the Campaign to End Loneliness focusses on elderly men.⁹⁵ Studies have shown that older men are more susceptible to disconnection and isolation than women. They are less likely to seek out medical treatment and less likely to utilize the

⁹⁵ Brian Beach and Sally-Marie Bamford, *Isolation: The Emerging Crisis for Older Men Report*, Campaign to End Loneliness. <https://independent-age-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2016-05/isolation-the-emerging-crisis-for-older-men-report.pdf>.

programmatic offerings designed to minimize isolation. Circling back to the question of emotional labor, we see the long-term repercussions. Because many straight men have depended on their partners to keep them connected to community and to take care of themselves—in body and spirit—widowers are at an even greater risk of disconnection. In this era of increased loneliness, women’s friendships have much to teach us about the benefits of cultivating these kinds of connections.

In her book *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship*, feminist theologian Mary Hunt explores the power of women’s friendships and the sacramental nature of these relationships. Writing as a white Catholic woman and lesbian, she argues that the wisdom we can glean from friendships between women speaks to the greater human condition.⁹⁶ She takes Sallie McFague and others to task for not explicitly addressing the particularities of women’s friendships. In so doing, she argues, they neglect the unique positionality of women and women friends. For Hunt, these relationships on the margins are distinctively capable of breaking open the conversation around oppression—whether sexism, exploitation of the environment, or racism. Hunt rejects the way our culture has given greater social capital and respect to traditional familial structures and romantic partners. She turns to friendship as model for embodied mutuality. This grows into a more expansive definition of ‘family’, including other kinds of intimacies. Hunt draws upon stories of women connecting across lines of racial difference, marriage status, and social location. It was difference that allowed these women to magnify their hearts, growing in capacity to see the other. As their

⁹⁶ Mary Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 82.

relationships grow, they learn from one another and indeed see the holy in their friend—and between them. She writes, “what is new, and to some controversial, is taking a previously marginalized, often ignored, and usually condemned experience and making it the center of a theo-ethical framework that is not for lesbian women only but at least implicitly for all.”⁹⁷ While women’s friendships have seemed superficial and expendable within the patriarchal culture, they have so much to teach us. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that our patriarchal culture has stamped out—ignored—the very models of intimacy that have been invisible embedded within its fabric. Perhaps our patriarchal culture knows this, deep down, and was right to distrust the three young women walking through the campus of the all-boys school. The prophetic nature of deep relationship has the capacity to disrupt the dominant culture. The loneliness we are experiencing as a public health issue today reflects a grave deficit in prioritizing relationality, intimacy, and the sharing of inner landscape and spiritual journey. These deficits for some are default settings for others. Part of the work of alleviating loneliness and spiritual impoverishment is sharing these stories of possibility and disseminating practical wisdom into the world.

A few years back, a young Catholic woman invited me to dinner. She shared a four-bedroom apartment with five other senior women. These students were from diverse backgrounds—racially, ethnically, and religiously. They studied in different fields but found their common ground in gathering around the supper table once a week. When I had the great privilege of being their guest, I brought fixings for a salad. “Wow, fresh vegetables!” they screamed, with only some irony. We plated the salad beside heaping

⁹⁷ Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness*, 4.

helpings of delicious pasta and homemade sauce and feasted together in that small upstairs kitchen. I knew going into the evening that some of the roommates were curious to downright confused by the religious identity of the woman who invited me. She was a fierce feminist and writer but she was also the president of the Catholic Community at Tufts. As this young woman once articulated, “I feel like I am often too religious for my feminist friends and too feminist for my religious friends.” This woman lived in the in-betweenness of her identities which for her—and for many Catholic feminists—are complimentary, not incongruous. As we sat at the supper table that night, I saw how the wisdom of the table brought together women who were learning deeply from one another. They asked questions of genuine curiosity. They graciously took up space and were agile when others pushed back. There was a confidence and a drive at that table and it truly inspired me. Several of them were suspicious of my presence—and rightfully so. What would it mean to have a chaplain at their apartment? And yet, they welcomed me in. While these women might not have the opportunity to live in such close proximity to one another—and so many peers—later in life, they used their time at Tufts as a way to enrich themselves in other cultures. In so doing, they also worked out to muscles of intimacy and vulnerability. I often heard about these dinner table conversations on Sunday nights while cleaning up after mass with this student. It was clear that these women had added a whole new dimension to her life and spiritual journey. The integrity of the space and the authentic process of inner exploration brought them to a place of mutual relation.

Friendship as Sacrament

Mohamed (Hamoody) and Joseph were roommates for their four years at Tufts University. They had been paired by the residential life matching method as incoming students and instantly hit it off. Both men were deeply religious—Joseph, a Catholic and Hamoody a Muslim. These young men, named by their parents with wonderfully iconic names from their traditions, often found that they had more in common with one another than they did with students from their own student religious organizations. They were deeply invested in one another’s lives—casually mentioning the elements and commitments of one another’s day the way we might expect a significant other. Except, these men were not a couple. They were friends.⁹⁸ During their shifts working at the Interfaith Center and the Chapel, Hamoody and Joseph would tell us about the long conversations they had at night. They shared the stories of their immigrant families, spiritual practices, and the central elements of their respective traditions. One evening, as they lay in bed, Joseph elaborated on his Italian family’s devotion to Mary. He talked about the art on his grandmother’s walls and his own practice of praying the rosary. “She is our mother,” he said. “She holds all of our sorrow and joy.” To his great surprise, Hamoody began to expound on the role of Maryam (Mary) in Islam. Joseph was floored. He had no idea that Maryam appeared in the Quran and that Muslims uphold her virginity. In a similar way, Hamoody was keen to learn just how personal and meaningful Mary was to Joseph. Their connection over Mary/Maryam—this shared celebrated figure

⁹⁸ Notice that I do not write “just friends” as this demeans the very richness of the relationship. Such language takes away from the intimacy of friendship, placing the preferred status to romantic relationships.

from their traditions—inspired the young men to host an afternoon gathering for Catholic and Muslim students to tell stories and go deeper.

The story of Hamoody and Joseph shows the sacramental power of creating a sacred space and the transformative act of listening. While the dorm room was ordinary in its function, it became a sacred space, a site of beholding as the holy broke in—inhabiting the space between these two friends. Their spiritual journeys intersected and twisted around one another as they listened with attentiveness and genuine curiosity. The friendship of Hamoody and Joseph teaches us how dyadic connectedness affects the greater whole. The ripples of their friendship continue to be felt even after they have graduated. Students still speak of this Mary/Maryam conversation, even students who were unable to attend that day and who were not yet enrolled at Tufts! Joseph and Hamoody's speaks to the cost of loneliness, it is not simply the inner pain of the isolated individual but all that fails to enter into the community as a result of disconnection. From the Catholic lens, it is the Body of Christ that suffers. Each part is necessary. (1 Cor. 12:22, NRSV) To think, all those moments of potential connection that could have been lost—the dismantling of Islamophobia, the expansion of religious literacy, the sense of wonder around rediscovering and discovering elements of one's own tradition. In this way, the relationship of these two young men captures Mary Hunt's vision for friendships breaking down walls of oppression and prejudice.

The Mary/Maryam program reverberates into the landscape of Trinitarian theology. As a Catholic, I imagine their dorm room conversations as witnessed and inspired by the Holy Spirit. As historian James McEvoy puts it, friendship is a mystery of

God's grace, which is "the origin of friendship between parties who do not at the very outset resemble each other but through 'the Spirit of God's working redemption within their souls,'" they come to find deep resonance and recognition with each other.⁹⁹ It is what brought these two men into a place of spiritual boldness and transformative vulnerability. On another level, however, the foundational element of the Trinity is difference. The Triune God lifts up the holiness of diversity and testifies to a deeper unity in multiplicity. Difference is holy. Moreover, it bears notice that Joseph and Hamoody came together to honor Mary/Maryam, in all *her* complexity. They wished to shed light on the differences as a way to better understand her. She was not merely a medium through which to get to God—which is its own trend in contemporary male Catholicism—but holding her story and the stories of their traditions as holy. This kind of nuance is countercultural. It rejects the essentialization of such a critical character and instead draws out a deep desire for something authentic and relatable.

The leadership, vision, and pastoral authority of Joseph and Hamoody also functions as a powerful retort to the culture of clericalism. While the next chapter will explore this dynamic of de-centered power within the church more fully, it is worth noting here how that these dynamics—friendship with difference, the Holy Trinity, lay empowerment—are deeply related. Leonardo Boff sheds light on their interdependence. He places difference and empowering lay folks in conversation with the Trinity, drawing our attention back to the beginning. With the Holy Trinity as the starting point of Christianity and the he rethinks what it means to be church. Boff writes,

⁹⁹ Cited by Carmichael, *Friendship*, 67.

When the church forgets the source that gives it birth—the communion of the three divine Persons—it allows its unity to become uniformity; it lets one group of believers all by itself assume all responsibilities, keeping others from participating; it allows its confessional interests to prevail over the interests of the reign; in short, the rivers of bright waters is in danger of becoming a stagnant pond. We must be converted to the Trinity to recover diversity in communion, which create the dynamic unity that is ever open to new enrichment.¹⁰⁰

De-sanitizing the Trinity means bringing nuance, complexity, and difference back into focus. It means welcoming a diversity of voices and celebrating a diversity of gifts. Rescuing the fate of the church from the clutches of those in power will allow it to better serve the multitudes who are baptized. In this spirit, let us also de-sanitize friendship.

Difficulties in Friendship

Friendship is hard work. It takes time, patience, and grit. Thus far I have been focusing mainly on the strengths and more obvious gifts of friendship but as we all know, with vulnerability comes the potential for hurt. Students often come to my office to talk about their frustrations with friends—being ditched for a significant other, managing expectations with someone who constantly cancels or flakes out, or the betrayal trust. These are the common stresses that come with friendship. It would be unrealistic and unfair to suggest otherwise. Of course, there are other more demanding stresses on friendships—accompanying a friend through crisis, learning how to employ boundaries, or watching helplessly as a beloved struggles. These are difficult moments that demand a different kind of attention to one’s own spiritual life and rootedness. I will address managing disclosure and self-care support in times of crisis in chapter five but now I attempt to illuminate the stakes and the beauty that come with friendship.

¹⁰⁰ Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 67.

Our culture is deeply impoverished when it comes to friendship and appreciating intimacy outside of marriage. We do not have language for these kinds of relationships, which makes them literally unspeakable. Mary Hunt would argue that this also makes them extremely difficult to publicly celebrate, something they need to fully thrive and something we need to fully employ in order to push back on the two-dimensional understanding of friendship that come with the status quo.¹⁰¹ One alumna, Margaret, was devastated when her best friend died suddenly in her mid-twenties. Since her friend's passing, she has returned to help facilitate conversations around grief and loss. She has shed light on what is a taboo subject in our society. This woman's willingness to share her experience gives others permission to honor their own profound loss. Margaret always enters this conversation from a place of love and gratitude. She pleads with her audience to speak their love aloud, to make bold and prominent the beauty and rugged devotion of deep relationship. While she loves to share stories of her friend and even complains about her beloved's enraging foibles, she also talks about cultivating a deep practice of gratitude. Taking advantage of the present moment to express one's love means being attentive to the presence of God among and between us. It is staying awake to the sacramental experience of friendship—in our beautiful friends the Holy reveals itself.

Like so many who have experienced profound loss of a friend, Margaret was in the impossible position of trying to communicate what her friend's life meant to her. In most work settings, there is little appreciation for grief and loss at all, let alone loss

¹⁰¹ Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness*, 135-136.

outside the immediate family. Telling the story of her relationship with her beloved is resurrection. It celebrates the gift of their love and commitment to one another and also spreads the gospel of friendship. Margaret's testimony opens up the conversation of vulnerability. As Mary Hunt points out, "friendships past become part of friendship history upon which are built new and deeper forms of intimacy."¹⁰² That is to say, all who have shaped us continue to shape us in the present and future, in the choices we make, in the ways we express ourselves and open ourselves up to experience pain and loss. Margaret's beloved lives in her words and in the love that Margaret radiates out towards the world. Her beloved lives on as she inspires younger students to imagine new intimacies. But in light of Mary Hunt's words, she also lives on *and* continues to grow in Margaret's present relationships. Margaret has been forever formed by her beloved friend and her crushing absence. This observant and self-aware young woman is always looking for clues to better understand how she has adjusted and at times overcompensated in the wake of her transformed relationship with her beloved.

To acknowledge the reality of loss in friendships, is to save this conversation from the realm of the syrupy and the saccharine. It is to place it squarely in reality and in the everyday experience of suffering. We do not get to choose what we risk when we make ourselves open and vulnerable to those around us. Margaret and her friend could have easily closed themselves off from this kind of intimacy. It was because of their vulnerability with one another, however, and their shared sojourner spirit that the experience of loss was even more profound. I am reminded of the grittiness of other

¹⁰² Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness*, 135.

sacraments. The Eucharist, of course, comes to us by way of brokenness—the brokenness of Jesus’s body and the greater Body of Christ, including our own failures as we attempt to follow him. Coming together around the table is a witness to the shared vulnerability and our wholeness is brokenness. Our brokenness is what makes us holy. Opening ourselves up to the risk of being hurt is the only way to move towards the kind of authentic connection that stirs the soul and satisfies the need for deep human relationship. Friendship is a sacrament insofar as it reveals God even in those moments of suffering. The passion of Margaret’s friend, the passion of Margaret, the resurrection unfolding in every retelling of their story, including this one here—they are never without the brokenness and they are never without the holiness. The feminist lens allows for this reverence of the everyday and for a critical eye to understand those oppressive structures which seek to limit human capacity and human connection. In fact, the imperative of feminist ecclesiology is to break free from restrictive norms and to celebrate deep, honest, authentic connection. I devote the next chapter to engaging the richness of these traditions. They are my compass steering me towards a practical application.

CHAPTER FOUR: FEMINIST ECCLESIOLOGY AND A SPIRITUALITY OF CONNECTION

I turn now towards a scholastic and liturgical tradition committed to excavating and dismantling systems of oppression so as to bringing to life—through praxis—a spirituality of connection. For six decades now, feminist theology and feminist ecclesiology have been re-centering relationality and the holy contexts of women’s lives. These fields were first imagined into being by human beings who were caught up in and being held down by interlocking systems of oppression. Over the years, these fields have grown, deepened, and shifted. In collaboration with womanist and mujerista theologies, they have engaged questions of identity and intersectionality. These prophetic theologians and activists have inspired many innovative ministries, writers, and thinkers. Truth be told, however, most lay folks have no idea what feminist theology is. Sadly, neither do many theologians, ministers or seminarians. The exhilarating momentum of religion in the feminist movement continues in many places but I for one am concerned with the issue of sustainability. I do not fear that this kind of questioning and thinking is relevant—that is not up for debate—but I am worried that younger generations will not have the exposure to the feminist lens and may find themselves or their descendants reinventing the wheel or stuck in the mire.

The fields of feminist theology and ecclesiology have been siloed in many ways, even as they have led the way in interdisciplinary thinking. As with anything labeled ‘feminist’, the field is often painted into a corner as something ‘just for women’ or branded its own independent field. If the dismissive use of the word ‘just’ was not

insulting enough, such misnomers mischaracterize the work of feminist theologians which in turn lessens reach and thus transformative capacities. Feminist theology and feminist ecclesiology are for everyone. In fact, they seek to honor *all* of creation and for this reason, I employ them here to both better understand the problems of loneliness and clericalism and to shine light on the spirit of innovation needed to move forward in a more just and healthy manner.

Threaded throughout this chapter are stories of ministry. They serve as a window into the many layered realities of these named problems—loneliness and clericalism—and provide a hopeful glimpse of the seeds of transformation. There are stories that testify to the moving spirit, to stretching the religious imagination and sacramental consciousness. They reflect back to us the Christian mythos of making the impossible possible. In this chapter, there are stories that hang upon my body like a lead coat. Those dehumanizing dynamics are all too familiar and a painful reminder of what has driven so many of the baptized out of Catholic parishes. I appeal to these stories because they are holy and full of grit and revelatory awe. I engage these stories with the feminist spiral methodology wherein action and reflection, tradition, and context are in constant conversation with one another—shaping, informing, and grounding the discourse.¹⁰³ These stories shine light on so much that has been shielded and strangled by fear. There is fear of the loss of power, fear of exclusion, fear of retaliation, fear of shame, fear of change, and fear of the unknown. I draw upon the emancipatory lenses of feminist theology and feminist ecclesiology to dismantle the fear that has kept so many in a state

¹⁰³ Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 30.

of complacency and/or arrested development. It is my hope that several key components of these traditions will speak to the efforts of this project and help chart a path towards wholeness and holiness.

As a woman and a Catholic Chaplain in a highly patriarchal church, I ask what it means to embrace feminist leadership in this context and how cultivating a feminist ecclesiology and a feminist ecology within our community might mitigate loneliness and spiritual impoverishment. These threads of thought will guide me as I consider what creative ‘solutions’ might look like. This chapter is not an overarching portrait of feminist ecclesiology or an outline of the most important aspects of the tradition, rather the elements I have chosen to highlight will help break open the adaptive challenges that I have outlined thus far. I begin with a reflection on my own context. As I unpack experiences of clericalism and transformation through a critical feminist theology of liberation, I ask reflect on embodiment and reimagine understandings of power and authority to dream of something new. Letty Russell offers clarity when she writes, “this style of theologizing in a continual spiral of engagement and reflection begins with a commitment to the task of raising up signs of God’s new household with those who are struggling for justice and full humanity.”¹⁰⁴ I trust in this co-creative process to bring about a more just world. Experiences of profound connectedness have taught me that God’s new household *is* within us, bursting through the seams of our doubts and fears, hungry for affirmation in this world and in our own consciousness. This holy and divine energy, the perichoresis in and between us, delights in our partnerships with one another.

¹⁰⁴ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 27.

Just discipleship, feminist leadership and the spirit of innovation are the groundwork for cultivating a spirituality of connection.

Catholic Chaplaincy in a Secular Setting

I inhabit a particularly interesting place in ministry. As a lay woman with theological education, I am a nonordained Catholic religious professional working in a secular institution without an assigned priest. I am Catholic Chaplain in an Interfaith Chaplaincy. The intention of Vatican II for more lay ministry has been amplified by the larger issue of priest shortage, which has been unfolding for the last century. For these reasons, there are increasingly more women like me serving as a chaplains in secular higher education. This is the reality. Women ministers like me are with our communities all week, working closely with congregants, community partners, and colleagues from diverse backgrounds. We know the landscape of our communities, many of us listen deeply to the culture of our context and are intentional with every choice we make to honor the complexity and nuance. At the end of the day, however, the most foundational ritual of our tradition, the Holy Eucharist, must be celebrated by a priest from outside the community, a person who does not know the fabric of our context. Such a reality is a great source of frustration for me and many of my colleagues. There is a profound disconnect in sacramental and pastoral ministry which means that we are inherently outsourcing the core experience of our tradition, giving priority to the system of power that is divorced from the everyday meaning making process and culture of the congregation. While I have the great joy of working closely with many fabulous priests in Boston—several of whom have become good friends—we cannot overlook the greater

implications of this dynamic. At its best, it is an opportunity to bring diverse voices, perspectives, and charisms into an ever-changing congregation of students. At its worst, it reinforces the idea that women in ministry are stop-gap measures who are muddling around waiting for men in collars to appear in order to begin ‘the real sacramental work’.

Early on in my ministry at Tufts University, I had an experience that highlighted the on-the-ground stakes as regards this expression of clericalism. Usually I am quite discerning about who I invite to celebrate mass with our community. I go to great lengths to find clergy whose passion and calling includes celebrating liturgy with college students. The priest coming that evening, however, was not someone I knew. He arrived early and I showed him around the chapel. When he asked to meet the altar servers, I told him that was not part of our practice. He was surprised and then assured me he would find someone. Before mass, he stood before the assembly of weary college students and started working the room. Eventually, he asked if anyone had ever been an altar server. When I looked to the congregation, I saw one hand slowly climbing from a pew in the back. The priest then invited him—or rather, volun-told him—that he would be serving tonight. And he did, dutifully.

I felt sick. This young man stood on the chancel for the entire service. He was not someone I knew and I was sure this was one of his first times at the chapel, if not *the* first time. It was humiliating for me, the religious leader in this context, to imagine that this was the welcome a new student received in our space—a not so subtle manipulation turned into forced/guilt-ridden service. I do not joke when I say that I never saw that student come to mass again. Of course, I do not know if this experience had anything to

do with that choice, but I was disgusted. The priest's actions were incongruous with the culture of our community where we strive to lift one another up, embrace generosity, and celebrate diverse gifts and callings. We do not bludgeon one another with guilt or disingenuousness.

When the homily came, the priest ignored the readings and focused only on vocations. "All vocations are good," he began before focusing on the particularly favored vocation: the priesthood. As with many churches, the majority of our congregants are women, and the women present that evening were insulted and offended that this person came all the way to our campus to deliver a message that did not speak to them. They—we—were invisible. The end of his sermon was nearly hyperbolic with its celebration of consolidated power and astoundingly erroneous theology. "It's like you are you in a room and God is next room," he said, "but the door is locked. Luckily there is someone with the key...(pause) the priest." I froze. Did those words really take up space in the ether of our chapel? It was hard to believe even as it was happening.

At the end of the prayers of the people, a senior Political Science major offered her own extemporaneous prayer: "For all who have been omitted and silenced in our church, especially women called to the priesthood—that they may be affirmed as full persons." Her voice was clear and loud. Even though she sat in the second pew, I could hear her words back in the narthex. My heart grew with love for this woman. She had been able to speak when I was still frozen. The celebrant flinched for a moment and then added his own extemporaneous prayer, "For unity in our petitions." My stomach churned and my jaw clenched. He had to have the last word. He had to attempt to silence her

voice—and in the name of ‘unity’. His brashness only emboldened and enraged our students who were appalled by such an expression of dominance, cowardice, and desperation.

In the week that followed, students fumed and cried in my office. Women *and* men were upset by his visit and the message he brought with him. Some felt it was a setup. Students who attended Catholic secondary schools complained of the broken record around vocations. They knew the script, they had heard it countless times before and were exasperated to have to sit through another heavy-handed effort to surface more vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Others lamented the shock of it all. They came to mass to be nourished by their community, to receive sustenance for the week, to offer their gifts and celebrate the contemplative evening gathering with one another. They had not armed themselves for battle. They expected such sexism and narcissism from their parishes back home but not here. The affirming culture within the Catholic Community at Tufts had given them a sense of safety, dignity, and ownership and this priest violated these values.

Sadly, this story is neither unique nor extraordinary. That is the point. Lay women ministers of the world have countless stories of humiliations and the ongoing effort of cleaning up the messes made by clergy—many of which are far more damaging and dangerous than this experience. On the one hand, I hesitate to even share this story because he—and the greater culture of clericalism—has already taken up so much space. On the other, it testifies to the ongoing challenges within the oppressive system. It highlights both the absurdity of clericalism in a time of priest shortage and how moments

of rupture plant the seeds for what Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza calls ‘the discipleship of equals.’ A single priest cannot take the blame for centuries of clericalism steeping in the communal consciousness. After all, he himself is oppressed by the very system in which he oppresses others. In the words of Mary Elizabeth Moore, such experiences serve as “signal lights that illuminate the problem.”¹⁰⁵ They require our attention to better understand the stakes and dynamics. They also serve as an entry point into dreaming of something new, something redeemed and emancipatory. In addressing oppression within our churches, Moore goes on to say that “at the root of this reality is a limiting of human life. Such limits destroy our ability to perceive what the church can be at its best—what life can be at its best.” So much of our tradition talks back to the limiting efforts of clericalism. The Holy Trinity is a statement of unity in multiplicity. The desire to limit laity whether in voice, in service, in fullness of faith is an affront to God’s diverse creation. The celebrant that night swooped into a new place without any interest in learning who we were. He wielded his collar as a weapon, seeking to spread his warped secret password gospel.

At the risk of romanticizing this experience of clericalism or seeking out a silver lining, the fact remains that this priest’s visit proved to be a teachable moment. Our students learned what partnership *does not* look like. The experienced clarified how much they did value *just* partnership and mutuality and how not to take them for granted. A spirit of intentionality ignited within them. They learned *how not* to be a guest in

¹⁰⁵ Mary Elizabeth Moore, “Feminist Practical Theology and the Future of the Church,” in *Practical Theology: International Perspectives*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer and J.A. Van Der Ven (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 192.

someone else's home, which shined light on the need to listen to others and learn from them. They experienced the power and wisdom in humility, as he embodied none at all. That evening was traumatic for our community. There is no way around it. It reminded so many of us of the oppressive cultures we seek to dismantle, bringing them to our door and altar. Mary Elizabeth Moore would argue that it was an experience of sin. The sin of clericalism is insidious as it imposes a lesser sense of self-worth upon God's creation. Moore writes that "sin is a way of being in the world that destroys or denies life...sin is alienation from God and the world—a moving against relationship rather than a participation in relationships that are life sustaining."¹⁰⁶ The closing words to the priest's sermon diminished our students' religiosity and sense of ownership around matters of faith. They shined light on my own invisibility. Whether he truly believes that he and all who have received the Sacrament of Holy Orders stand between baptized and God or not, holding this illusory precious key, his words and posture sought to strip these students of their authority—pastoral authority, prophetic authority, and sacramental authority. That said, the prophetic witness from the pews that night—in that senior's voice and even in the silent protests of all who internally rejected his message—testified to a wonderfully wily spirit in motion. I deeply wish my students did not have to experience this and other violations in order to see be convinced of the power in their own voice and conscience, but I am grateful that it happened in a space where they could safely unpack it and make meaning of it—meaning that they could then bring out into the church and into the world.

¹⁰⁶ Moore, "Feminist Practical Theology and the Future of the Church," 200.

The Baptized: There is no lay or ordained

In her understanding of power in the multitudes—and power multiplying in community—Letty Russell presents a model of leadership in the round that privileges and celebrates the gifts of God’s people and all of creation by rejecting structures that solidify power and silenced voices. She acknowledges what so many have experienced, namely, that transformative moments of authenticity, intimacy, vulnerability and deep connection rarely occur within the institutional structures of our churches. On the whole, our institutional churches do not value the feminist spirituality of connection but remaining engaged in the church is a way to shepherd the institution towards conversion. Catholic feminist theologians who followed Russell, including Susan Ross and Mary Hunt, have complicated this portrait offering innovative approaches for engaging multiple spheres at once. As I explore more deeply in the coming pages, they reject the binary thinking, leaning more towards the richness of ambiguity and the promise of a new vision.

If laity are to truly live into their baptismal call, they must recast themselves in the narrative of church. Central to that is leaving behind the language of ‘laity’ and the binary of ‘clergy/laity’. This shift is easier said than done within a Catholic context. Integrating the everyday sacramentality and sacramental consciousness into the lives of the baptized, however invites them to take on a more holistic and nuanced spiritual life—one where they have the confidence and competence to take up space, employing their compassionate ears and presence when needed. Mary Hunt explains that it is time

to leave aside the differences between clergy and lay, and instead speak of ourselves simply as ‘baptized Catholics,’ with the implication that all baptized people are priests according to the sacrament (of baptism). It is time to leave aside distinctions such as ‘nuns and lay women’ or ‘the sisters and the laity,’ because

all women and non-ordained men are laity. We are socialized to fundamentally flawed logic and the linguistic missteps that go with it. Such distinctions have no place in a discipleship of equals.¹⁰⁷

The key to this passage from Hunt is her reference to “the implication”. These two words command our attention. It is no casual thing, this implication, and much work must be done to unlock its potential. I am speaking of work within all the baptized, to use Hunt’s preferred language. Many theologians have pointed out that there is no way to define ‘lay’ without using a negative (as in non-ordained). Thus, the very terminology conveys absence and scarcity when we should be directing our attention and our hearts towards abundance. Moreover, when a priest leaves the priesthood, regardless of reason, the term used for this process is ‘laicization’. The culture of clergy superiority is embedded into the landscape in so many ways. While I agree ideologically with Mary Hunt’s rejection of binary thinking—and its dangerous precedence—I worry that lay folks feel neither seen nor valued. Are those who have been violated by clergy—in any number of ways—ready to find themselves in a position of common identity with abusers and their protectors? What needs to happen in order to make this a safe and respectful proposal? The discipleship of equals attests to the fact that feminist leadership is a witness to unity and strength in multiplicity. We are each necessary pieces to the body and as such, our presence and active contributions are essential to fully living out the call to relationship,

¹⁰⁷ Mary Hunt, “New Feminist Catholics,” in *New Feminist Christianity: Many Voices, Many Views*, ed. by Mary E. Hunt and Diane Neu (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2010), 283.

the call to be Jesus followers.¹⁰⁸ But how do we acknowledge the trauma experienced by nonordained people by the hands of those in authority ‘over’ them and still move forward to a wholly new model of church? I am suspicious of gradations of change as they often are thrown as crumbs to the oppressed, but how do we begin the process to help lay folks taste the expansive and transformative sacramental imagination and the spirit of innovation that is necessary for church renewal?

We cannot underestimate the power of our historical internal programming to perpetuate the kind of expectations and limitations we have experienced within such a binary culture. For this reason, the question of language is a serious one. While I do not expect to develop an entirely new vocabulary in this project, I think it is worth noting this need as we look towards pushing back on the “death dealing” traditions within the tradition.¹⁰⁹ We enter into the conversation and the work with preconceived notions of who is deserving of ‘power’ and who is not. Feminist leadership, however, distinguishes itself by embracing the value that there can never be too many leaders—that power is magnified in the multitudes. Russell says that “power and leadership gifts multiply as

¹⁰⁸ Brené Brown, whose contributions to leadership studies cannot be overstated, offers another expression of this goal. She sees the leaving behind of binary thinking as a move towards embracing wholistic sensibility. She speaks in regards to both internal and external conversations, writing that “the opposite of living in a world of false binaries is practicing integration—the act of bringing together all the parts of ourselves.” Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts* (New York: Random House, 2018), 90. The prophetic power of Catholic feminists calls for just such integration and embodiment. These identities are in constant conversation with one another and sharing the inner and outer discourse is its own example of courage through vulnerability. This kind of story-centered leadership resonates deeply with the spirit of feminist ecclesiology and the spirituality of connection.

¹⁰⁹ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 47.

they are shared and more and more persons become partners in communities of faith and struggle.”¹¹⁰ Just discipleship *is* leadership. It is acknowledging the responsibility to live out one’s baptismal call, to spread the gospel, and *be* the Body of Christ in word and action. It is shining light on the gifts of others to magnify the beauty of God’s diverse creation. It is moving towards the margins to disrupt the deceitful narrative of divinely sanctioned oppression, ultimately dissolving the distinction between margin and center.

Feminist ecclesiology shines light on that which is already unfolding. The interesting position of women in ministry within the Catholic church is layered with richness, ambiguity, and meaning. Often, however, their work is shrugged off. Women’s invisibility within the church is at once a great sign of their oppression and a strength which can be utilized to magnify love, acceptance, and hospitality. Susan Ross sees the rich liminal space many women ministers inhabit as the seeds for transformation. For Ross, this work—and meaningful reflection upon this work—is already expanding the sacramental imagination. She writes,

Women’s pastoral experiences in sacramental ministry are already helping to open up dimensions of the sacraments that have tended to be muted, or overshadowed, by clerical domination, a domination that has interpreted the sacraments in dichotomous ways: valid/invalid, sacrament/sacramental, real/symbolic...the participation of women in the multiple facets of sacramental ministry—preparation, education, pastoral care, as well as liturgical presiding—has in fact blurred the traditional dichotomous distinctions between ordained and lay, sacrament and sacramental, real and symbolic. The consequence of this blurring is an enhanced sense of real presence as located in the community, a greater awareness of the role of the community in the initiation process, the

¹¹⁰ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 56.

significance of relationships in the sacraments of vocation and reconciliation, and the importance of pastoral care for sacramental life.¹¹¹

The blurring is prophetic. As Ross says, it offers an “enhanced sense of the real presence as located in the community.” Through blurring we are blessed with greater clarity and expansive vision of sacraments and sacramental consciousness. The nuance and ambiguity talk back to overly simplistic thinking which thrives in a transactional model of ‘spiritual’ life. The reality remains, however, that this feminist consciousness is both magnificent and a struggle to carry into the local parish setting where such rich sacramental ambiguity has been going on for decades. For my colleagues in such ministry contexts, a looming threat hovers above all the innovative work and visioning they have intentionally done from the ground up. Lay ministers who have been doing this work for years, painstakingly building relationships one pastoral visit or cup of coffee at a time do it anyway knowing that their efforts could be threatened by a single reassignment from the archdiocese. A change in leadership in the parish might mean the instantaneous undoing of years and even decades of lay labor and pastoral presence. These systems are deliberately designed to privilege the Bishop’s convenience over any spirit of innovation that might be alive and well in such congregations. Because by canon law parish councils are technically recommended and not required, it is possible for a newly assigned pastor to disband the existent parish council and abandon the model altogether. In these instances, the community must start from scratch without even the structure to give voice and shape to the parish. Simply said, this is no accident. While it may not be set up to

¹¹¹ Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections: Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum Press, 1998), 92.

intentionally asphyxiate lay leadership, it is designed to prioritize the needs of the priest and bishop, the effect of which is clear—dominate and silence the laity. This structure destroys sustainability and the functional communal memory which testifies to something greater—to say that we are more than the building, more than the pastor no matter how charismatic or objectionable he may be, and more than the consumeristic model of church that has prevailed in contemporary American Catholicism and American Christianity more broadly. I cannot ‘solve’ this injustice but I can offer insights into how to bolster the spiritual formation and ownership of the baptized so they may inhabit Mary Hunt’s space of ‘the implication’. That is to say, the implication that their baptism ensures their priestly call to the sacraments. If we are to trust the spirit of innovation to guide just discipleship, then we must acknowledge the unknown before us. We may not know where we are headed at the moment. We may only know that small commissioned connections are indeed transformative.

The Therapeutic Power of the Discipleship of Equals

In the summer immediately following divinity school, my roommate worked with a street ministry in Boston. She invited me one morning and that experience changed how I thought about church and ministry. I arrived early and watched my roommate greet each person by name. Several folks had expressed concern over one congregant, and when she arrived, they welcomed her in. This woman’s friend had just overdosed and she was waiting for an update. The other congregants hugged her and helped her to a seat on the circular concrete ridge flanking the sidewalk. Mid-way through the liturgy, while we were standing for the gospel, she was overwhelmed by emotion. “I’m going down,” she

hollered, “I’m going down.” I watched from behind the assembly as three fellow congregants reached out towards her collapsing body. They caught her. They held her. They kept her safe.

I return to this moment quite often as it marked a turn in my awareness of embodiment and church. These congregants ministering to one another challenged my assumptions. The decentered liturgical space of this street ministry reminded me of Women-Church spaces I had experienced, but it took this acute moment of pastoral care between congregants for me to wake up to the prophetic nature of this model of church. The facilitators in this ministry had created a space of welcome, inspiring an authentic sense of ownership. This church was the church of the people who attended. Their needs were prioritized first and foremost. As a Catholic, I am used to seeing the faithful defer to priests. I have seen the faithful come to doubt their own version of reality and adopt the opinion of someone who may have just literally passed through the room, uninformed about the context and the deep questions of those present. As a Catholic, I have also watched serial abusers and their protectors ruin touch. In response to the continued unfolding of horrors—within the Catholic Church and many other institutions that have protected powerful abusive men—many of us are, quite naturally, gravely conscientious about the how we engage with the body. We are educating ourselves around consent culture, modeling healthy boundaries, and prioritizing transparency. This moment in the sidewalk sanctuary, however, remains visceral for me. The healing and redemptive nature of those outstretched arms bore the seeds of conversion around touch. We cannot allow

abusers to control the narrative. Touch can be therapeutic. It does not have to be violent. This woman and her friends know this and my students do too.

A few years ago, a celebrant shocked us by downplaying the sexual abuse crisis and cover-up. It was a well-intentioned but deeply problematic attempt to comfort the congregation, as he assured us that it was not so big of a deal and that the abuses happened a long time ago. Several students in the pews immediately pushed back at him. They were eloquently defiant. After mass, students remained in the sanctuary, offering hugs to one another. Some were quite literally speechless. One young man stood there stunned after the closing hymn and his words still echo within me, “that was so disappointing.” Many folks engaged with the priest during our fellowship hour. It was clear that he had not thought about this issue as much as they had.¹¹² I marveled at their composure. While they were rightfully angry, they explained their thinking to him with such patience and composure. And—he listened. When I escorted him out, he turned to me and said, “I need to rethink this.”

Every congregation has survivors within it, and we are no different. That night, the survivors in our midst were my first concern. As one point, I watched from across the room as two beautiful human beings held one another in deep care and it was truly a sacrament. Here were two people making God’s grace visible before us and within us. The comfort and consolation extended by one was an expression of Mary’s compassion. The act of receiving such tenderness amidst suffering reminded me of Jesus’ broken body held with intimacy and love. They were Jesus and they were Mary. This gesture of mercy

¹¹² This detail alone is upsetting and hard to believe but it is beyond the scope of this project.

extended its reach beyond those two people, offering itself as a gift to those like me who just happened to be lucky enough to be present. While I have intellectually accepted the restorative power of touch and have personally experienced this truth in my own body, I realize now just how much my Catholic context and identity has stripped me of any generosity around touch. Consciously and unconsciously, my initial reaction to anything regarding touch is total distrust—red alert. Like so many who are enraged and broken by the vicious abuses and insidious cover-up, I had shut down certain parts of my mind and body. In an effort to protect myself and others, I abdicated any influence I may have in shifting the narrative. I had, in essence, surrendered in matters of touch, allowing abusers and their protectors to get the last word. That night, however, these students brought touch out of the depths of corruption and manipulation. In their embodiment of mercy, empathy, and compassion, they redeemed touch—something only they could do.

That next Sunday, I gathered with a small group of students and staff for a healing ritual. It was a way to acknowledge what had happened but also an expression of commitment to moving forward in healing and restoration. We read the story of the paralytic whose friends lowered him in to see Jesus and students reflected on tearing barriers asunder to create more room. Earlier that day, a child had been baptized in our chapel and the waters remained in a shallow bowl. We turned to those waters to bless ourselves and one another. They dipped their fingers into the water and then drew a cross upon their own hearts. They then asked permission to inscribe a cross on their neighbor's palm. The celebratory waters of the morning were a gift to the wounded community. It was crucial for lay people to offer that healing and comfort to one another. The

restorative nature of the ritual bled into the mass, the confession, and the Holy Eucharist. It was a continual moment of embodied sacramental revelation.

The two stories told above show the transformative and therapeutic power of disciples embracing their pastoral authority. If the people of street ministry had deferred to the pastor, their friend would have quite literally fallen. Likewise, if the students of the Catholic Community at Tufts had deferred to the priest, they would have denied their truth and that of so many others. In both instances, the congregants chose connection over disconnection. Both of these communities affirmed the Body of Christ by affirming the humanity and dignity of those around them. This is feminist leadership.¹¹³ Rosemary Radford Reuther's reflection on clericalism offers greater texture to these experiences. She writes,

if we understand clericalism as the expropriation of ministry, sacramental life, and theological education from the people, then women-church—and indeed all base Christian community—are engaged in a revolutionary act of reappropriating to the people what has been falsely expropriated from us. We are reclaiming sacramental life as the symbol of our own entry into and mutual empowerment within the redemptive life, the authentic human life or original blessing upon which we stand naturally when freed from alienating powers...ministry is the active praxis of our authentic life and the building of alternative bases of expression from which to challenge the system of evil.¹¹⁴

By blessing one another, the students reappropriated these sacramental responsibilities and rights from those who have tried to hoard them, the same people who have

¹¹³ Candace Christensen describes feminist leadership as “a practice emphasizes women’s leadership as imbued with an ethic of care, which is illustrated through a need to care for others via communication and collaboration.” Candace M. Christensen, “Using Feminist Leadership to build a performance-based, peer education program,” *Qualitative Social Work* 12, no. 3 (May 2013): 254-269.

¹¹⁴ Reuther, *Women-Church*, 87.

perpetrated terrible abuses and negligence. When they drew upon their bodies and those of their friends, the cross – saying aloud the persons of the Holy Trinity—their voices disrupted the ether of the sanctuary, breathing into being, once again, the foundational relationality of their tradition. They expressed their own pastoral authority by embodying the comfort, mercy, and healing of our teacher and savior Jesus. Within this sacred space, we shined light upon the holiness of consent. This expression of dignity and respect stood tall in opposition to the insidious betrayals and acts of violence that our institution has excused. It would have been grossly inappropriate to have a priest assume this role. The wounded community deserved to be healed by itself. While many clergy have been gracious and conscientious during this time of constantly unfolding horrors in the news—and we must acknowledge the importance of clergy holding one another accountable—that night, the laity testified to healing and holiness within themselves.

Like any oppressed group of people, lay folks have a capacity for understanding the intricacies and nuances of these interlocking systems of oppression. There are many times, aside from moments of acute crisis, where they can see what the hierarchy cannot. This perspective is wholly distinctive. They are uniquely positioned to offer comfort, consolation, and sacrament to one another. In her text *Enfleshing Freedom*, M. Shawn Copeland writes that “sacraments form and orient us to creation, to human persons and above all to the Three Divine Persons.”¹¹⁵ In Copeland’s words, I imagine this sacrament of healing as a tolling bell or a compass, calling us back into the foundational teaching of relationality and solidarity. In this same passage, she goes onto say that “sacraments pose

¹¹⁵ Copeland, Shawn M. *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 125.

an order, a counter-imagination, not only to society but also to any ecclesial instantiation that would substitute itself for the Body of Christ.”¹¹⁶ The ‘counter-imagination’ captures the spirit of innovation, of pushing back upon the status quo and rejecting any hoarding of power. These anecdotes illustrate a deep commitment to the Body of Christ, as lay people are building something new and restorative. They are embracing the ‘counter imagination’ of Copeland, outstretching their arms to make the space for voices that have been silenced, tearing the roof asunder in order to tend with care and consent to bodies that have been violated.

Increasing Sacramental Consciousness

Subverting and reimagining existent structures is central to feminist leadership. As Russell writes, “instead of worrying that we will lose our faith as feminists, we should be celebrating the fact that we have been given gifts that will allow us to talk back to tradition.”¹¹⁷ Talking back is a form of enrichment, contextualizing our tradition and keeping it relevant to the realities of our lives. What might such a celebration look like? Though it might at first seem less exciting than a full-blown party, one way to ‘begin’ is to encourage lay folks to stretch their sacramental consciousness. Expanding sacramental consciousness encourages us to see more holistically, the lives we are already leading as sites for holiness and sacramental encounter. Russell shines light on the power of this kind of reorienting. She argues,

if our feminist spirituality is a spirituality of connection to communities of faith and struggle, then we need to know not only how to make the choices that connect

¹¹⁶ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 125.

¹¹⁷ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 200.

us to God, to ourselves, and to our neighbors in the margins of life but also how to recognize the grace-filled moments when we experience the coming together of the bits and pieces of our lives in a way that transcends the sum of the parts and nurtures the connections.¹¹⁸

For Russell, these kinds of “grace-filled moments” are not just spiritually nourishing for the individual but they serve to activate essential connective tissue for transformation. This matter of ‘recognition’ is one I explored in earlier chapters as regards the ‘receptive condition’ of Dubus. It is not just that moments of sacramental rupture surround us in our every day but that we have an ongoing invitation to encounter them, experience them and allow them to nurture and enrich us. This connective-tissue could be connecting us to ourselves, to God, and one another. It might also be connecting us to future experiences of ‘grace-filled moments’. When we begin to train ourselves to live with this kind of orientation towards the holy, we find our wells replenished, but we have to get to a place where we can truly feel them. The norm of numbing throughout our days—with food, technology, intoxicants—disables our ability to see. After all, when we numb, we numb the so-called “good” and “bad”. We do not get to choose; everything is dulled. The powerful disruptions or ‘grace-filled moments’ we do experience incentivize this way of being in the world but they are even more impactful when we have cultivated that ‘receptive condition’. In the loneliness research, Cacioppo refers to the receptivity for ‘social lifts’.¹¹⁹ The data reveals that lonely people find it more difficult to glean energy or that ‘social lift’ from small bursts of joy throughout the day. That means that

¹¹⁸ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 202

¹¹⁹ Cacioppo, “Lonely traits and concomitant physiological processes,” 151.

connection begets connection. Less isolation means more capacity to see connection and beauty and allow it to nourish us.

Expanding sacramental consciousness calls us to move towards connection and wonder. It is a way to talk back to a tradition and a culture which over the past few decades has grown stale thanks to the fetishization of the official sacraments and the infantilization of laity. In many ways, I am calling for a paradigm shift in how we experience the everyday—like the ‘counter-imagination’ of which Copeland speaks. When we name as holy the everyday realities of our lives, we lessen the chasm between big S and small s sacraments. We reject that and all the false dualisms limit our capacity to be whole persons.¹²⁰ More integration of sacramental consciousness in the lives of the baptized means more of a capacity to lead and live as spiritual leaders. The baptized are already living sacramental lives worthy of exploration and deep theological reflection. In the context of higher education, they are surrounded by human beings who are living equally sacramental lives and learning together to be oriented towards the sacred in their midst is the beginning of working out those muscles of connection.

I am arguing for a reorienting of our understanding and relationship to power and authority. Part of this process is helping lay folks wake up to the sacred power and authority already within them and that which takes shape when they are together. Leadership materials often quote G.K. Chesterton when distinguishing between these two words—power and authority—which have so often been wrongly used as synonyms.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Moore, “Feminist Practical Theology and the Future of the Church,” 193.

¹²¹ Peter Marty, "The Secret of Authority," *The Christian Century* 133, no. 13 (2016): 3.

He is said to have explained to a friend over lunch that “if a rhinoceros were to enter this restaurant now, there is no denying he would have great power here. But I should be the first to rise and assure him that he had no authority whatever.”¹²² This helpful distinction may guide the following conversation but we must also shed the layers of assumptions around how we conceive of these two words. We have been taught to think of power as solely an expression of top-down force. In our culture and sadly in our church, power is something exerted over and above. It is something to possess and to consolidate. An inside-out construction of power, however, pushes us towards a more nuanced and embodied experience of power-together. While we who are working for justice are called to account for the grossly uneven distribution of social and political power, Carter Heyward challenges us to remember that ultimately, the only real power comes from God. She writes that “the power of Jesus, which is the power of God and the power of all persons with faith in this power, is a shared power—moving, given, received, passed on, celebrated, held in common as ours, not mine alone or his alone or hers alone. God’s power does not belong to Jesus. It belongs to us, to the extent that we pass it along.”¹²³ Like Jesus’ words in the Gospel of Luke, the act of giving power is what invests power within us. (LK 6:38, NRSV)

Melanie May, a theologian of embodied theology asserts that, “authority derives from presence.” That is to say, being present in an intentional way—with other people,

¹²² Marty, “The Secret of Authority,” 3.

¹²³ Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 119.

with ourselves and with all of creation—honors creation through holy witness.¹²⁴ May published writing her prophetic text *A Body Knows* in 1995, a time she referred to as “an age of absent presence.”¹²⁵ In 2020, we live in a more exaggerated state of this ‘absent presence.’ For May, the gospel challenges us to embrace, embody, and live out the Good News so as to tell the story of resurrection and abundance. She inverts the conventional connotation of ‘authority’ as simply exerting force, arguing that real authority is “bearing witness”. Real authority is

revealed in persons whose life together—as ekklesia or as oikoumene—makes manifest God’s unfailingly faithful presence among those whom prevailing values judge unlikely or unlovely. Authority as bearing witness is, in short, self-authentication—whether of a personal or corporate self—derived from revelatory presence that is mutually life-giving.¹²⁶

In a time when millennials are often grossly mischaracterized by their elders as selfish and self-obsessed, it is important to place May’s statement of self-authentication within the context of her greater critique and vision of power and privilege. She is not offering a navel gazing theology of syrupy self-help, rather, hers is a prophetic poetic. She offers this re-vision as someone on the margins herself. A lesbian clergy person living with mental illness, May’s positionality and attention to her own racial and socioeconomic privilege grounds her words in an outward facing interiority. Her heart—and indeed her

¹²⁴ Melanie May, *A Body Knows: Theopoetics of Death and Resurrection* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 70.

¹²⁵ May, *A Body Knows*, 71.

¹²⁶ May, *A Body Knows*, 71.

whole body—are expressions of revelatory presence and hospitality towards those society has cast away or silenced.¹²⁷

The necessity of each part of the Body of Christ comes through in May's poetic. She is shining light on the forgotten elements of our most-incarnational religious tradition and modeling the spirit of theological reflection and sacramental consciousness I outline above. Central to her greater vision, however, is the honoring of particular experience, holiness, and wisdom of 'each part'. She writes that "the authority that derives from revelatory presence is not possible unless the uniqueness—including the wisdom—of each person and of the other is mutually recognized and respected."¹²⁸ Revelation is not revelation without the whole body. Likewise, authority is not authority without the full body. When we look at the passivity of lay people in the pews and the ways lay folks have been stripped of agency and age-appropriate spiritual formation, we are seeing the results of a sinful system. We may not be able to change the larger institutional structures that encourage this framework but we can begin at the most local level.

In her own discussion of renegotiating our relationship to power, Mary Elizabeth Moore calls us to attention with her use of the word 'sin'. She challenges us to direct that critique of a sinful system back towards ourselves and calls us to investigate—interrogate—our own complicity. Moore explains "sin is refusing to receive the gifts and blessings that we are given, including our own sexuality and power. Further, sin is denying or thwarting chaos and creativity, or refusing to make decisions in the midst of

¹²⁷ May, *A Body Knows*, 72.

¹²⁸ May, *A Body Knows*, 74.

chaos thus avoiding change in ourselves and our institutions.”¹²⁹ For Moore, like Heyward, power is a gift from God and something we are called to honor as disciples. Employing the term sin, however, Moore adds depth. It is a kind of reality check. Denying our own power—God’s power—is turning ourselves away from the holy. We must reprogram ourselves to think about power as a not something to be hoarded but a something to be shared and thus magnified. Embedded within this passage from Moore is a charge for the baptized to use their power to encourage innovation and creativity. If it is sinful to remain silent in the face of stagnation, we might rethink our own responsibility to speak and act within the wider institution. While our actions must begin at the most local of levels, we are called to trust in the power of God to continue to inspire novelty. A feminist critical lens encourages us to speak aloud that which has been deemed unspeakable. Clericalism, like loneliness, thrives in secrecy and silence. Both of these issues demand that we speak aloud their insidiousness and try to better understand how to dismantle their hold on us. The same patterns that keep us from connecting deeply with one another keep lay people in a state of arrested development. As Russell explains,

Feminist interpretation of the church calls into question the contradiction between theological interpretations of ministry as service and the practices of clerical privilege and exclusion. In my opinion, the overcoming of the contradictions points us not only back to the origins of Spirit-filled communities among the first Christians but forward to a time when the gifts of the Spirit for leadership are recognized among all those who share new life in Christ.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Moore, *The Sacramental Act of Teaching*, 199-200.

¹³⁰ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 64.

In the spirit of Russell, Copeland, Hunt and May, the next chapter moves towards the innovative spirit of feminist leadership. It is my hope to celebrate just discipleship by encouraging lay folks to embrace God's power and to practice their own ministries of presence—in the world, with one another, and in their own lives.

CHAPTER FIVE: DEVELOPING THE SKILLS OF A SACRAMENTAL FRIEND

Three weeks after I saw Dana at the Interfaith Center, she came to the chapel for an evening Taizé worship. I was hoping she might join us considering her love of music and to my great delight, not only did Dana attend, but she brought with her songs to share from home. We crossed our legs over meditation cushions on the deep red carpet of the chapel floor and together with several other students, we sang those repetitive tunes. It was a night of story, prayer, and music—new and familiar. Each person contributed with their voice and presence—reading, leading us in prayer, or just sitting mindfully with the group. One senior, Bill, marveled at the mosaic forming between us. Bill was among the many holdouts when it came to singing during mass but that night he was persuaded to try something new. Usually quiet and reserved, we were all surprised by the person who emerged. His voice was like a tolling bell, startling us awake as he belted out the hymns, loudly annunciating each syllable. He was tone deaf and that made it all the more beautiful. That night served as a reminder that each week, and indeed each time we gather in communion, we create something new, something unique, something beautiful. I was moved by the way the others related to Bill. They welcomed his voice with all its sharp, flat edges, encouraging him to engage in this new way, which was way outside his comfort zone. He was already someone deeply embedded into the fabric of the Catholic community but by accepting of our invitation to sing, Bill offered us a whole another layer of connection. His contribution was markedly different from what we might expect—and maybe even hoped for—but it was a gift.

After the service, Bill remarked on how moving it was to share practices and song. The gathering had breathed life and imaginative richness into him and he was especially grateful for Dana's contributions. Her spiritual generosity had fed him. In that small meeting room next to the sanctuary, Dana opened up to Bill about the challenges she had faced that semester. Bill, a white Italian American senior from Long Island, listened intently and then thanked her for sharing. The two of them sat across a small coffee table, grazing on vegetables, cheese, and fruit. With silent compassion and presence, this senior honored Dana's experience. And when he did finally speak, he remarked on her courage to be vulnerable and offered simple expressions of solidarity and gratitude. That hour and a half was truly a moment of mutual care.

I begin with this story because it offers a glimpse of the spirit of surprise and possibility that comes with meaningful connection. It can, of course, draw people out and stretch their religious imaginations, but it can also create space for mending and healing. This chapter seeks to bring together the larger threads of this project—loneliness, spiritual impoverishment and clericalism, the Holy Trinity and relationality, and Feminist Ecclesiology. What would it look like if we, as Catholics, truly honored friendship as the sacrament it is? As I unpack this loaded question, I also map out the greater vision of my practical application, a program called The Seventy-Two. This chapter expands upon the theological background of this program and the Appendix which follows, is an example of what this dreaming might look like in practice.

Before I proceed, however, I wish to reiterate the fact that a friend will not simply 'cure' loneliness. The program I describe here is not a 'solution' in the style of a

transactional self-help book, but a deeper read into the meaning making process of connectedness—the spirituality and sacramentality of relationships. It is a single expression of how we might re-orient ourselves towards God, self, and other. Dana and Bill were not magic pills for one another, rather the delicate and intimate interplay of their shared vulnerability and spiritual practice was what yielded this transformational moment. They held one another's experience as holy. In the meeting room, they bore witness to the dignity in and between them, responding with genuine curiosity and humility. These are muscles that need our attention. Like working out in the gym, it takes time, patience and persistence to develop these skills. The reality of loneliness on campus and in our world means that for many students, these muscles have atrophied or have never been developed. The wisdom of personal trainers teach us, however, that we need to isolate muscles to strengthen them. Only with this precision work will they be able to perform in synergy with other muscles to serve the greater body. Like working out the physical body, the muscles of relationship and connection have life-long impact. It is not just the student experience in four years that is affected, but the connection to future roommates, colleagues, spouses, and children. All future encounters will be enriched by the development of these muscles of communication, attention and gratitude.

In his deeply personal book *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen rejects the oversimplification and desperation of any desire to 'combat' loneliness with a simple solution. He writes, "As long as our loneliness brings us together with the hope that together we no longer will be alone, we castigate each other with our unfulfilled and unrealistic desire for oneness, inner tranquility and the uninterrupted experience of

communion.”¹³¹ Human beings are not products to be consumed or prescriptions to be swallowed. Our culture might be obsessed with the quick fix but these worldly ways are far from the call to honor creation—the holiness of our own lives and those of others—and *koinonia*. It is unfair to place such responsibility in the hands others. This statement from Nouwen is a charge for spiritual formation and a call to reorient ourselves towards the holy—in all its beauty and grittiness. It is not the person in our midst who can save us from loneliness, nor can we presume to be a human cure for anyone else. Rather, it is the deep listening to ourselves, God, and one another that will plant the seeds for a genuine disruption—ultimately leading to an enriching connection.

The sacramental friend is a fellow comrade and sojourner on the spiritual journey, a co-conspirator in the hard work of making meaning and a witness whose presence is both a challenge and comfort in the cultivation of interiority. This relationship requires that we slow down, listen deeply and hold one another accountable. It is about prioritizing relationality, growth and patience, not perfection. It is about embracing the most distinctive aspect of Christianity—the Holy Trinity. As I explored in Chapter 3, the Trinity has much to teach us about how to engage in the world as a faithful Christian. The connectivity in mutuality pushes us to see and honor our interconnectedness as part of all of creation. LaCugna offers language for this way of being. She writes,

The real reason for asserting that God is incomprehensible mystery is that God is personal, God is the origin of all personhood. a person, divine or human, is by definition an ineffable mode of existence, an elusive presence, a unique expression of nature. We speak of a person revealing himself or herself to us. By that we do not chiefly mean learning facts about that person’s past or present but

¹³¹ Nouwen, Henri, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 19.

seeing with the ‘eyes of the heart’ who that person is, grasping through love and ongoing relationship his or her ineffable and inexhaustible mystery.¹³²

That night at the chapel, Dana and Bill saw each other with “the eyes of the heart.” Their attention to one another and the experience of shared practice helped create the conditions for a receptive condition, and even offered up a taste of depth—the forever seeking to understand the ‘ineffable and inexhaustible mystery’. The Holy Spirit at work in and between them created something new entirely. The rough and unexpected chime of Bill’s off-pitch voice contrasted so beautifully with his ‘fierce tenderness’ in the meeting room.¹³³ And Dana, with her creative spirit and generosity pried open that space—filling it with possibility and a posture towards experiencing the now, God already here.

This passage from LaCugna, transports me to the first Sunday of the academic year and the unmistakable energy in our community. After a week and a half of pre-orientation and orientation, first year students are often exhausted. They have introduced themselves dozens of times and still they feel they are just scratching the surface. Our welcome dinner immediately following the 5pm mass is a true decompression space. I have learned to resist tradition and culture and avoid formal introductions (name, pronouns, hometown). Over the years, I have felt their numbness to the well-intentioned exercise. Sometimes such numbness—a kind of introduction fatigue—is expressed by

¹³² LaCugna, *God with Us*, 323-324.

¹³³ Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness*, 22. I employ this term in the spirit of Mary Hunt’s work and her exploration of friendship and feminist theology. While she returns to friendship in a lot of her work, this primary text gets at the justice seeking model of being in relationship.

students out loud! They are weary and at-capacity with that kind of formulaic greeting. They are simply in need of nourishment. We hold that space as a time for breaking bread over conversation and deep breathes—trusting in the spirit that we will come to know each other as the weeks and semesters unfold. It is not uncommon for this gathering to spill over as conversations go on and on. Students—new and returning, undergraduate and graduate—sit across the table from one another, free to just be. It is my hope that they see each other not as competition but as human beings. This past September, one first year student reported that this dinner marked the most meaningful conversation he had had since arriving to campus a week and a half earlier. LaCugna may not have been referencing the chaos of orientation week in her writing, but this example offers a way into the sacramental friendship program. In the freneticism of higher education, how do we create spaces for students to behold one another, as the beautiful complicated human beings that they are? We mature in faith by exploring new ground in community, by witnessing to holy in our midst, and developing an honest sense of self-knowledge. Deep relationships with friends help us to see that's God's nature is friendship, walking beside us, always. How might we help students prioritize a different kind of space, one rich for spiritual exploration and meaning making?

We are constantly learning and evolving. Like Richard Rohr's framing of the Trinity as the forever knowing, we are forever knowing ourselves and reevaluating how we engage with the world. Embracing the long view of relationships means tending to growth and change, which requires agility, natural curiosity, and attention to detail. In her discussion of sacramental friendship, Mary Hunt assures her readers that "the point is not

to make the world safe for dyads, but to shift the focus from ‘the two’ to ‘the many’.¹³⁴ Hunt’s words speak to my vision of this project. We must start somewhere and that somewhere is between two or three gathered together. For some, it will start even before that—in the prioritizing of relationships over tasks. This shift requires a disruption of personal and societal expectations and leaving behind two-dimensional concepts of ‘productivity’. We must shed our culture’s transactional lens and obsession with bigger as better and lean into the transformative power of small moments of connection. Building from this center is a way of retaining the vision of this spirituality of connection. We are not working towards a quick fix, rather, we are trying to learn from the trees and grow into and in harmony with one another.

The Seventy-Two: A Vision

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. ²He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. ³Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. ⁴Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.

(LK 10:1-4, NRSV)

When Jesus sends his friends out to by two, he is commissioning them into relationship. He is sending them forth to go spread the gospel ahead of him. In Luke 10:2, Jesus affirms that there is so much to ‘harvest’ but he needs ‘workers’. He is describing an orchard full of trees bearing apples and a dearth of human beings available to pick, sort, and transport those apples. Imagine the sense of urgency that this might stir in a farmer. What would it look like for us to move with this kind of urgency? God is eager

¹³⁴ Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness*, 119.

for us to do this work, to spread the gospel, but to tend to one another as we do it. Luke urges us to look outwards towards the many lines of difference that seek to keep us apart. He uses the number seventy-two as a wink and nod to his audience. They would no doubt have seen it as a reference to Genesis Chapter 10 and the seventy-two nations. With this reference, Luke is both connecting his readers to the Hebrew Scriptures and encouraging them to see their greater calling. To include all the nations, Jesus is communicating the full body of Christ in this mission. This act of commissioning reaches beyond difference to do the hard work in the vineyard—reaping the gifts already given. It captures the radical welcome of feminist ecclesiology and the prioritizing of presence over product.

In the spirit of Jesus sending the twenty-two out two-by-two, I name this campus program The Seventy-Two. Students are grouped in dyads or triads, committing to spend one hour a week with one another and a half-hour reflecting independently in a journal. This program is an opportunity to dwell in relationship—to grow, be challenged, and get uncomfortable. It is a scaffolding. Each week, I will send out suggested guidelines for how they might spend their time together—invitations. They are not to-do lists. Instead, they are a beginning. They serve to lessen any anxiety students might feel around how to spend this kind of time—shared time, non-transactional time—providing rich practices of shared reflection and exploration. The pressure to perform is so great in this context of higher education. When I have offered unstructured time in hour intervals in the past, some students have bled anxiety. While this can be a productive exercise itself, focusing on the dis-ease, that is not the goal of The Seventy-Two. It is my hope that The Seventy-Two will function like shooting and dribbling drills at soccer practice. They are an

opportunity to focus on smaller skill sets of social, emotional learning while stretching their spiritual life so as to foster a more dynamic sacramental consciousness. The most important element of The Seventy-Two, however, is the act of being together. This simple but prophetic act disrupts the dominant culture which favors tasks over people. The Seventy-Two invites students to be deliberate as they carve out space within the busy week to offer their most precious resource to someone else—their time.

Our students are not always encouraged to be vulnerable. In right relationship, however, the invitation to go deeper and to try on different practices is really an invitation to embrace vulnerability. Returning to the scripture, Jesus instructs his friends to “carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.” (LK 10:3-4, NRSV) Just a verse before he acknowledges that his charge is no small thing. *“I am sending you out like lambs among wolves,”* he tells them. These are not inherently comforting words but they do express an awareness of the challenges ahead. The work is hard, the journey is rugged, but in communion we are made stronger—in will and in faith. By denying them the comfort of possessions on the road, he is saying, “let your friends be your compass,” “trust in the generosity of those you will meet,” “trust in the power of relationship.” As I imagine Jesus’ dyads heading out, I wonder how strange the pairings must of have felt—if the seventy-two were completely ‘on board’ and/or as full of anxious expectation and uncertainty as first year college roommates. Perhaps some were strangers at the beginning and other pairs already knew each other. The meandering conversations that unfold on a long journey are unlike anything else. Our sense of time shifts and the hours stretches as do the prolonged periods of silence and our comfort with them. We are

transformed and our perception of the world and one another is transformed when we journey together awake to our surroundings. While each week the participants of The Seventy-Two will only be spending an hour together, the long view of spiritual journey aims to point in this direction of reframing time. The culture of scarcity encourages us hoard our time for ourselves even when that may make us more isolated. Moreover, the pressure to be “productive” exacerbates feelings of loneliness as it perpetuates the false notion that our worth is inextricably linked to our capacity to perform or produce. Rethinking our relationship to time, means prioritizing connection so as to give freely this most precious resource. These pockets of connection increase possibility, nourishing the spirit of abundance and spontaneity that are so lacking in our culture.

Being Realistic About the Tides of our Lives

Placing loneliness in conversation with spiritual journey and spiritual formation, Henri Nouwen adds another dimension to this work: destigmatizing the ups and downs of the journey. His words offer comfort, normalizing the experience of loneliness in such a way so as to remove the sting of stigma. He provides clarification on the very definition of spiritual life affirming that common unspectacular everydayness of emotional and spiritual fluctuation are—in fact—the work itself. When he writes, “the spiritual life is that constant movement between the poles of loneliness and solitude, hostility and hospitality, illusion and prayer,” he acknowledges and normalizes the rash swings between connectedness and isolation.¹³⁵ We will all experience these emotions. Our response to them and our ability to create the conditions to minimize them are the things

¹³⁵ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 11.

in our control. Part of the challenge of accompanying those on spiritual journey—and especially those who are used to excelling at most things they attempt—is acknowledging and, if possible, disarming performance anxiety. Likewise, it is imperative to shed the all too common fear that one is in some way already ‘behind’. A program like this must be challenging but not play into the common script that others, belittles, or alienates the so-called ‘unchurched’. Rather, it must normalize the roller coaster ride of spiritual journey and celebrate the fact that fits and starts are the journey itself. These are attempts to embrace the ongoing invitation to begin again and make an ‘about face’. They are not dead ends but critical moments for ongoing conversion and transformation.

Another element of realistic expectations is acknowledging the very unique tides of life on campus. No day is the same in higher education. Schedules shift from day-to-day making it even more challenging to adopt a daily practice. Student calendars are packed on some days with back-to-back responsibilities and other days are wide open. To honor this reality and set students up for success, it is important to focus on the weekly interval. Daily practice is difficult for anyone. For folks in high pressure contexts with variable schedules, however, it can present even greater challenges and liabilities. Even for the most routine-grounded individuals daily practice can be intimidating and discouraging. Well-intentioned but unrealistic goals may quickly devolve, and with it the spirits of the individual. Students who take on a new practice often report feeling guilty when they are unable to reach their goal. They beat themselves up for not having perfected something that monastics devote their entire lives to. Any program designed to address relationship to self, God, and other must be tailored to the rhythms of the

academic calendar and invite grace and spaciousness into what is usually a culture of scarcity. A weekly commitment to a person rather than a task is the beginning of disrupting the narrative around busy-ness. This time will hopefully be something they look forward to as a moment of nourishment, surprise, and joy. Moreover, in an era when our days are curated and structured, there is something truly radical about embracing the experimental nature of this kind of program—and the spirit of spontaneity. Of course, there is the broader experiment of the project and assessing its efficacy, but The Seventy-Two invites participants into a weekly encounter with experiment. Each meeting of the dyads is an opportunity to embrace something new. The spirit of pilgrimage offers a helpful framing for The Seventy-Two but without a definitive destination, we have even more impetus to focus on the journey.

Developing Active Listening and Deep Listening Skills

Before I was a college chaplain, I worked at an all-boys Catholic preparatory school as a campus minister. There are many elements of that experience that I return to but one in particular continues to inform my thinking around systems of oppression, white supremacy, and active listening. During a discussion in my service-learning class one day, a student of color shared a personal experience of racial discrimination. He described what it felt like to be followed in a store, something that had happened to him while he was out with friends. A few loud white students immediately shrugged it off. “No,” they laughed, “that didn’t really happen.” One white student even assured his classmate that he had imagined it—insisting that he was just really sensitive and paranoid. Yet another white student took it upon himself to “play devil’s advocate”,

offering rationale for the storekeeper's hovering. When two other students of color assured the white students that this in fact had also happened to them and members of their family, the white students shook their heads again in disbelief. I shine light on this moment because it is a painful reminder of what is at stake when we do not truly listen to one another. This student made himself vulnerable, offering a piece of his own story—an account of a dehumanizing experience—to a room full of peers and they rejected it. If they had been listening, actively and deeply, to their classmate, they would have seen, acknowledged and even felt his suffering and anger. It would have disrupted their worldview, their own narratives and privileged understanding of the world. If they had truly listened to their classmate, his truth would have made their world bigger. Deep listening and active listening expands our capacity for empathy. It allows us to see more clearly the wholeness, holiness, and humanity of other people. It creates the conditions for solidarity to truly take hold and grow. Deep listening and active listening are key to building healthy relationships—friendships—across lines of difference.

The most transformative and perhaps radical thing these white students could have done was to listen. Listening, however, is no easy task. It often means challenging the status quo. It takes practice and courage. It takes a willingness to let go of our old worldview and willingness to take on that of another. The challenge deepens when we have that connection already established and we see our beloved—or even a stranger—in pain. It is natural to want to fix things. When someone we love is suffering, of course we want to try to help alleviate the situation and perhaps even fix the problem altogether. What we learn with time, however, is that sitting with or walking beside a friend is the

most powerful, compassionate and loving thing we can do. Henri Nouwen captures this tension beautifully in his meditations on solitude and care. He writes,

Real care is not ambiguous. Real care excludes indifference and is the opposite of apathy. The word care finds its roots in Kara which means lament. The basic meaning of care is: to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with...still when we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion who can stay with us in an hour of grief or bereavement, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares.”¹³⁶

Tolerating the discomfort in ‘not-knowing’ is a countercultural act. Our quick fix culture echoes the desire to skim our way through life. The sacramental friendship, however, is a relationship that holds complexity with grace and is able to sit with it. When we care for one another we are acknowledging the brokenness within. This, in essence, is recommitting ourselves to transformative power of mending and indeed, resurrection. Sacramental friendship means walking beside even when we are sent like “lambs among wolves” through the thicket of everyday life. It is my hope that The Seventy-Two will allow students the opportunity to be vulnerable enough with one another that they may acknowledge their own brokenness and learn to sit with someone else’s without running away, dismissing it, or talking over them. If a central part of loneliness is the longing to be seen—fully seen as a person—then we must begin by development these muscles and capacities.

¹³⁶ Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude. Meditations on Christian Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1974), 34.

Just as the sacraments are rugged and full of ambiguity, so are the realities of our lives. Personally and communally, we all experience painful loss as well as joy and laughter. Our alumni Margaret (from Chapter 3) conveys a sense of urgency in her talks with students about her friendship with her beloved and the grief that has held her since. She invites students to take hold of the present moment showing that we are always in God's presence and how our relationships reveal God to us. While this story is one of profound loss, it invites us to dig in to the very real demands of friendship. It is not always easy. It often comes with deep pain and trauma. Sometimes that is from the demands of showing up, hurtful words, or a misunderstanding that takes on a life of its own. Other times it is the agony of an untimely death. Unfortunately, in our culture, we numb out in these moments. We sanitize. We perpetuate the accepted cultural that omits the struggle of transition to college. Likewise, our social media presence is one that offers a highly curated portrait of our lives. So too it is with friendships. We do not always have a playbook for reckoning with this kind of relationship. Syrupy stories offer a less complicated perspective and can even add to stress and feelings of failure when things are not as smooth as we might expect them to be.

In this conversation of relationship grit and compassionate resilience, it is important to draw attention to the critical work of establishing boundaries. There is a fine line between staying in a relationship and working through adversity in a mutually respectful way and being manipulated in the tides of abuse. I am reminded of the saying "relationships are hard." If I had it my way, that statement would be a clause followed by another, "but they should not be THAT hard." Part of being in community and being in

relationships with one another means holding one another accountable and not allowing unhealthy dynamics to strip us of our power and personhood. Establishing healthy habits in early adulthood is vital to developing healthy and nourishing relationships moving forward in life and identifying problematic behavior.

The skills of deep listening can be applied to how we encounter the world around us. I am reminded of Mindy, one of our exemplar student leaders. Even as a sophomore, she was a steadfast source of rootedness, presence, and creativity. In an age of constantly evolving technology and lines around the block for the new iPhone, she refused to own a smartphone. Her friends teased her mercilessly about it. I was consistently moved by Mindy's self-awareness and her innate desire to cultivate a rich inner landscape amidst the noise of the college campus. One of Mindy's spiritual practices was making breakfast every morning. She woke up early, well before her roommates, so she could sit in the kitchen and prepare her oatmeal and coffee. She told me about the quiet of her apartment and the quiet of her mind. She did not listen to music or podcasts, rather, she greeted the day with an openness to beauty and simplicity. This practice helped her cultivate a posture of receptivity. Mindy's mornings were sacred and she nourished her body as she nourished her soul. Knowing this element of Mindy's life, I was surprised to hear her one day speak about the numbness she felt towards the landscape. "I know this campus is beautiful," she confessed to me, "but I cannot feel the beauty. I walk the same paths all day long and I see the flowers but I just can't feel them." I was grateful to hear Mindy be so transparent about something that clearly bothered her. Her words told a story of frustration. She expected herself to be able to engage with the landscape in an embodied

and sensuous way, but was troubled by both her inability to do so and her apathy about this inability. I am reminded of Nicholas Carr's image of the jet skier versus scuba diver. Like so many folks on our campus, Mindy was jet skiing from one task to another.¹³⁷ She shut down a part—or parts—of herself as she went about her day, covering distance from point A to point B but not engaging with the deep. Here was a young person who was driven to live purposefully, someone with a rich spirituality who meaningfully engaged with silence on a daily basis. I was so surprised to hear her say this, but then, of course, it also made sense. She had the self-awareness to acknowledge this pattern of behavior and to feel the disengagement within her body. This observation and insight was remarkable by itself. If even Mindy, can be numb to the landscape, however, how might we think about shifting the narratives for students who are far less seasoned in this kind of thinking and living?

Poet and philosopher David Whyte speaks about the ancient friendships we have as human beings living in bodies that are in relationship with the physical world, the landscape. In an interview with Julia Bainbridge, host of the *Lonely Hour* podcast, he explained the source of this sickness of disconnection:

The blue in the sky or the red in the sunset in the evening. Or the movement of leaves on the very top of the silent wood as the breeze is coming through. The sound of an owl in the evening. The smell of grass, the feel of a summer breeze on your skin. These are all conversations. These are actually all qualities and it is just very strange that we have now defined the fact that you are just not in a conversation with another human being as being alone. You are not alone. You are just not paying attention to all of these other thousands of qualities...One of the reasons why we are lonely is that we have forgotten that we have a friendship

¹³⁷ Carr, *The Shallows*, 7. Cited in Chapter 2.

with the sky, we have a friendship with our bodies with the way our bodies respond to the natural world.¹³⁸

This last line of Whyte tugs at me. He is challenging us to contextualize ourselves—our bodies—in the landscape and in the present moment. He is talking about a consciousness, an awareness, an orientation and receptivity towards the natural world and our place as elements of this natural world. Part of encouraging wonder and amazement is helping folks wake up to the relationships that are already there in their already holy lives. The spiritual practices of The Seventy-Two will hopefully stir students to see with fresh eyes. Mary Elizabeth Moore writes about the proactive search for wonder. While we may have moments of awe that slap us awake, in our daily lives, it takes deliberateness and attention to engage a hermeneutic of wonder. She writes, “when people practice attentiveness to God, they encounter the strange and familiar—unknown and known.”¹³⁹ This creative interplay between the strange and the familiar is itself a kind of sacramental reversal. Seeing with fresh eyes and awakening to creation is reckoning with the reality that we are always in God’s presence. For Mindy and other students who are struggling with flatness of their everyday experience of campus or their neighborhood, Whyte and Moore offer a way in. They are both speaking of remembering—remembering our relationship to the world but also re-membering (anamnesis) that our beginning is a Trinitarian beginning, that our humanness is grounded in our identity as God’s creation, that we are born into relationship.

¹³⁸ Julia Bainbridge, “Inner Lives: How Loneliness Tells You Where to Go, with David Whyte,” August 1, 2019, in *The Lonely Hour*, produced by Julia Bainbridge, podcast, MP3 audio, 5:26, <https://www.thelonelyhour.com/episodes#/david-whyte>

¹³⁹ Moore, *Teaching as a Sacramental Act*, 59.

Empowering Laity Through Tradition and Sacramental Consciousness

In Chapter Two, I explored the relationship between clericalism and loneliness. My aim here is to elaborate on how The Seventy-Two might help empower lay people to reject the culture of clericalism, expand their sacramental consciousness, and to tell a whole ‘new’ story. There are an infinite number of ways to engage the aesthetics, scholasticism, and culture of Catholicism. One of the most beautiful parts of being Catholic is that in our rich tradition, there is always more to learn. The well is deep, deeper than we could possibly imagine. Sadly, however, many lay people are not familiar with the tradition and have been cut off in their spiritual development and maturity.

Rosemary Radford Ruether explains the reasons and costs. In *Women-Church* she writes,

The clergy monopolize theological education, removing it to a place inaccessible to the people. Theological education is also developed in a language unknown to the people...The people are thus made to feel helpless and dependent on the clergy to interpret the scripture and to analyze theological ideas as symbols. Yet the laity are also told that the essence of faith is simple and easy and is based on a docile acceptance of the rules of life given to them by clergy. So, there is no need to think for themselves, but only to do as they are told.’’¹⁴⁰

Radford Reuther offers helpful context for understanding the far-reaching paternalistic overtones of Catholicism and how we might re-center the laity to be agents in their own spiritual lives and that of the greater Church. Two of the most distinctive elements of The Seventy-Two is exposure to tradition through diverse spiritual practice and the freedom to explore independently. This is an integrated and experiential pedagogical approach to spiritual formation. Within their dyads or triads, students will have the ability to grow like wildflowers. They will not be pinned down with expectations, but invited to pursue

¹⁴⁰ Reuther, *Women-Church*, 81.

meaning and beauty wherever they are planted. This means, mining their own lives for meaning and celebrating the holiness of their day-to-day existence. As autonomous bodies, these small groups have agency. They will be encouraged to listen to and follow the spirit, even if it takes them in unexpected directions. Like the other seventy-two, these bodies (the dyads and triads) are commissioned and holy. They need to be supported but not micromanaged. I will elaborate later on the specifics of my role as a chaplain in offering this support but the most important thing is that they are given the opportunity to grow independently and inter-dependently. This arrangement requires trust—trust in the students to explore and make mistakes, and trust in the Holy Spirit to guide them. Freedom is vital to the formation of an authentic relationship to God, self, and other. If the baptized are to reimagine their own power and authority, they need the spaciousness to explore. Freedom allows for an unmediated experience of the holy and a renewed personal sense of discipleship. Such a laissez-faire approach is counter to everything we see in the culture of clericalism, which has treated laity as children, talking down to them and hoarding knowledge. It is no small thing to trust and entrust lay people in this way.

Andre Dubus draws a straight line between isolation and a weak sacramental consciousness. He points at something deeper and quite emboldening, namely, a doorway into connectedness by way of a personal posture or orientation. He writes,

Not remembering that we are always receiving sacraments is an isolation the leaves do not have to endure: they receive and give, and they are green. Not remembering this is an isolation only the human soul has to endure. But the isolation of a human soul may be the cause of not remembering this. Between isolation and harmony, there is not always a vast distance. Sometimes it is a distance that can be traversed in a moment, by choosing to focus on the essence of what is occurring, rather than on its exterior: its difficulty of beauty, its demands

or joy, peace or grief, passion or humor. This is not a matter of courage or discipline or will; it is a receptive condition.¹⁴¹

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, our students are often concerned with posturing. The culture of achievement in a hypercompetitive environment breeds this kind of pressure to perform. Dubus offers a new way of thinking about this word ‘posture’. His ‘receptive condition’ is a kind of ‘posture’ towards the sacraments all around us—to the holy bursting through. Of course, we are human and we do forget that which the leaves do not. How do we structure our lives so we might build disruptions and reminders into our weeks so that even if we do forget, which we will, we have people and practices in place to help us wake up again? The Seventy-Two will challenge students to mark their calendars with people, not tasks. The actual reservation of space/time in the calendar is a way of prioritizing relationship and those moments of recalibration.

Adding Nuance to Our Relationship to Technology

A few years ago, during the first week of Lent, our community gathered in the downstairs meeting room of the Interfaith Center for a Friday simple supper. I was inspired and excited by the timing of the meal because that evening marked the beginning of the National Day of Unplugging, which meant it was a perfect opportunity for a conversation around fasting and technology. My goal was to facilitate a dialogue with students, examining our relationship to our devices, reflecting on how they affect our head space, and what kind of practices—intentional and unintentional—define our relationships to the supercomputers that surround us. Before we even got started,

¹⁴¹ Dubus, “Sacraments,” 222.

however, the students caught me off guard. They laughed at one senior's observation: "Lynn, I love how you invite us to unplug but the Lenten devotionals you got are all electronic." They were right, the daily Lenten reflections I purchased for the Catholic Community at Tufts *were* all electronic. As a community, we had committed to living as paperless as possible, but this tension was real. The question is one we will be wrestling with for the rest of our lives: How *do* we critically engage our complicated relationship to technology? This tool can connect us in meaningful ways to resources and people who nourish our spirits and challenge our minds. But of course, it can also enable our addictions to distraction, stymie our thinking, derail our focus and take us further away from ourselves, one another and God.

The Seventy-Two will provide opportunities to re-encounter their devices and to explore and enjoy media with intentionality. Podcasts, films, music, apps—these are tools of great richness if approached with the spirit of receptivity. Such resources will also honor the wide breadth of learning styles and creative languages that they speak. In addition to learning more about the tradition and steeping in the what Andrew Greeley calls the 'enchantment,' students will hopefully cultivate an eye for 'finding God in all things' as the Jesuits would say. I see this element as another dimension to establishing a more nuanced relationship to technology. There are many ways of enriching the spiritual life and encountering the holy in our everyday media consumption. It is all about attention or a posture or orientation towards the divine—or what Dubus would call an

receptive condition.¹⁴² After all, even a two-word text message can be a sacrament, if we craft or receive it with our eyes and hearts orientated towards the holy.

A Posture Towards Grateful Living

When we give thanks at our community dinners, we turn our hearts in gratitude towards all who have brought the meal to our table—from the farms, to the trucks, to the stock shelves, and the kitchen. This act is no small thing. It reveals our interdependent nature as human beings and all of creation. Living gratefully strengthens a sense of deep belonging. When we are able to see outside of ourselves and to take on a posture of gratitude, we behold the rays of light—the holy—in the small and not so small elements of our life. Grateful living is not a syrupy exercise in positive thinking, rather, it is the gritty work of pausing, reflecting, and delving deep into our lives in order to surface again—revealing our place within a larger landscape.

Grateful living requires attention to the present moment. It requires that we stop, look and re/de-center ourselves. The Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast has been writing, speaking, and organizing for decades around grateful living. He explains that grateful living does not mean we are grateful for everything that happens, but rather that we seek to be grateful in each moment.¹⁴³ Each meet-up of the dyads will conclude with an exercise in cultivating gratefulness. This energizing and grounding practice will send them forth back into the world with their hearts open. As one student said after a

¹⁴² Dubus, “Sacraments,” 222.

¹⁴³ Krista Tippett, “David Steindl-Rast – Anatomy of Gratitude,” Dec. 21, 2017 in *The On Being Project*, produced by Lily Percy, podcast, MP3 audio, 1:51.
<https://onbeing.org/programs/david-steindl-rast-anatomy-of-gratitude-dec2017/>

gratitude practice on retreat “I just feel different.” Our internal landscape shifts when we tend to those things that give us life and sustenance. In the style of Ignatian Examen, the gratitude practice is a inventory of blessings. Done in dialogical format, sharing bits of gratefulness—or as Mary Oliver might say, “hints of gladness”—allows us to also stay curious about the person in midst. We see how they see the world and what is speaking to them. We connect over the shared experience of reorientation—of turning towards the anchoring process of meaning making. What I hear from students confirms my own experience of this grateful living, namely, that it (the gratitude) cannot be contain. Indeed, it bleeds into the rest of the day, making it difficult to find without bogged down by life. Put another way, that which we pay attention to grows. Gratefulness disrupts. In a culture of time scarcity and performance anxiety, it offers rootedness.

Implications for Interfaith Work

The strong multifaith culture of Tufts University and the University Chaplaincy means that we are always partnering with other chaplains and students—across lines of religious and philosophical difference. We support religious literacy and operating with an intentional interfaith lens. I mention this defining aspect of my ministry context because this program has profound interfaith implications. Our interfaith work depends upon active listening, the deep reading of one another and our lives. Cultivating these skills from within one’s tradition is vital formation as we consider the greater goals of increasing empathy across lines of difference. I see The Seventy-Two as an opportunity for Catholic students to enrich their faith life and work out those muscles so they will be

able to be more present and engaged in interfaith work. Though there are many Catholics involved in critical interfaith collaborations, this is a major growth edge for American Catholics. All meaningful interfaith work starts with a robust foundation in one's own tradition but The Seventy-Two offers another dimension as it will serve to expand the capacities of students to be more engaged as compassionate and curious community partners. In reflecting back on the friendship between Joseph and Hamoody, their intimacy grew out of these two things—a wealth of understanding and rootedness in their respective traditions and the ability to listen deeply.

Conclusion

When Psychology Professor Julianne Holt-Lundstad concluded that disconnection is as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, she chose her words wisely.¹⁴⁴ For those of us who have been in higher education for some time, we have seen a sharp decline of cigarette use on campus. This has followed the national trends around teen smoking.¹⁴⁵ Thanks to aggressive campaigns emphasizing the health risks, younger generations are far less likely to smoke than their parents.¹⁴⁶ Today, it seems no accident that research on the health risks for loneliness are put in the evocative language of cigarettes. Professor

¹⁴⁴ Jenny Anderson, “Loneliness is bad for our health. Now governments around the world are finally tackling the problem,” *Quartz*, October 9, 2018, <https://qz.com/1413576/loneliness-is-bad-for-our-health-now-governments-around-the-world-are-finally-tackling-the-problem/>.

¹⁴⁵ Youth and Tobacco Use,” *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, accessed 7 March 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/youth_data/tobacco_use/index.htm.

¹⁴⁶ Kenneth Warner, “The Remarkable Decrease in Cigarette Smoking by American Youth: Further Evidence,” *Preventative Medicine Reports* 2, no. C (2015): 260.

Holt-Lundstedt is shaking us awake, holding our lapels in both hands and speaking in familiar terms—terms we should understand. What I also hear in Holt-Lunstad’s voice is encouragement and hopefulness. After all, if we can make these sweeping advances with an addictive substance like nicotine, I am hopeful that we small and not-so-small efforts to decrease loneliness will also take hold.

The Seventy-Two will not eradicate loneliness on our campus. It will not singlehandedly change student relationship to time and transform everyone into monastics. What it can do, however, is offer students a low-stakes experimental space to work out the muscles of connection that have been stunted and atrophied. It can provide students with as much structure or freedom they want to develop lifelong skills of both relationship building and enrichment of spiritual life. This innovative space—the new creation, new household—is something that will hopefully inspire young people to take more ownership of their faith and faith tradition. Over the course of the semester, students will slowly build a spiritual practice toolbox that will expose them to different ways of engage in the religious imagination. It is not simply a cerebral exercise but an embodied move towards connection—to peers, God, and oneself. Ultimately, with these central components, The Seventy-Two aims to begin to tell a new story, a story of possibility. It is not inevitable, for instance, that college be a pressure cooker experience of anxiety and comparison. Conversations that exclusively jet ski across the surface are also not inevitable. We can provide a spacious scaffolding for students to engage more deeply and nourish the oft unspoken desires for meaningful connection. The program that follows is a single expression of what it might look for students to develop these skills

amongst themselves. It is vital that we trust them to do this work independently but with encouragement and support. For them to truly cultivate an authentic faith life—one that is rugged as well as smooth, fulfilling as well as frustrating—they must be empowered to live into the spirit of the Holy Trinity, to be the church, to embody Christ in the common, unspectacular moments of their lives.

APPENDIX

The 72: Sacramental Friendship

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.

(LK 10:1-4)

This term "The 72" comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 10. In this passage, Jesus sends out 72 of his followers to go preach and teach ahead of him. They are sent forth in pairs. He entrusts them with one another, acknowledging that his charge is no small thing. The work is hard and the journey is rugged but in communion we are made stronger—in will and in faith. When Jesus commissions the 72, he is commissioning each of us to be in relationship.

A sacramental friend is a fellow sojourner—a comrade on the spiritual journey, a co-conspirator in the hard work of making meaning and a witness whose presence is both a challenge and comfort. This kind of relationship requires that we slow down, listen deeply and hold one another accountable. It is about prioritizing relationality, growth and patience, not perfection. It is about embracing the most distinctive aspect of Christianity—the Holy Trinity.

As anyone who has driven cross country or hiked an ambitious trail can tell you, the meandering conversations that unfold on a long journey are unlike anything else. Our sense of time shifts and the hours stretches as do the prolonged periods of silence and our comfort with them. Your time with your partner will not doubt be interrupted by life and the demands of your schedule, but as you consider the long view, I invite you to embrace the spirit of journey that we see in the Gospel.

Commitment:

- 1 Hour a week in your dyad
- 30 Minutes of independent reflection in journal (writing/drawing/mixed media)
- 1:1 Coffee meet up/check in with the chaplain once a month
- Celebratory gathering at the end of the semester to share, assess, reflect theologically on the program and to just be together

Skills:

- Active Listening
 - Paying attention
 - Withholding judgement
 - Reflecting
 - Clarifying
 - Summarizing
 - Sharing

Building a Spiritual Life Tool Box:

- Carving out time for spiritual life
- Deep reading of the world/landscape, one's life, and one another
- Gratefulness
- Expanding Sacramental Consciousness
- Sacramental Living

The Chaplain will pair you with another student.

Week 1: First Meet Up in Dyad (Time and Covenant)

In your dyad, you will be giving your partner your most precious resource: your time. So, let's take a moment to think about what it means to offer time to another person and to God.

Read Aloud Together

Medieval monks are responsible for how we think of time. They needed a way to “hold the shape of the day” and to do this they established a bell system, which was the beginning of how we think of measuring time. They needed these markers in the day in order to fully engage with The Liturgy of the Hours or the Divine Office. This series of prayers unfold throughout the day as interludes spoken aloud, in community or alone. They include passages from scripture, short hymns, songs, and stories from the tradition. In 2020, it can be hard for us to imagine another way of encountering time. But let's try. The monks prioritized timeliness, not because of a need to squeeze every moment out of the day, but because their faithfulness required showing up for God. As theologian and nurse John Swinton writes, “scheduling had nothing to do with productivity in the way that we understand such a term in postindustrial capitalist societies. The particular events that the clock scheduled had to do with holding and shaping the day in such a way that sacred values, spiritual concerns, and the mundane issues could be seen as occurring within God's time and according to God's purpose.”

- What does the term ‘God's time’ mean to you?
- Are there moments of your day when you feel connected to something greater than yourself?

- How might thinking of your day as ‘God’s time’ be different for you?
- When you are stressed during the semester, how might you think of your time with your partner as a gift? To one another, yourself, and to God?

Challenge: Bring your calendars to the table

Look at your calendar. Look at your partner’s calendar. Literally bring them to the table and look at your week. With your partner, find a time in common that will work for both of you this semester. Note: This is a spiritual practice. Simply (or not so simply, as it were) carving out the time to be together is part of the sacramental connection. You are prioritizing another person, partnering with them to make this happen and creating the conditions for meaningful exchange. This is holy.

You will also need to find a half hour for reflection. You may choose to schedule an hour and a half together and then reflect in those last 30 minutes, or wait until later in that day to reflect on the session.

Create a Covenant

A covenant is a living breathing document that reflects back to us who we are when we are at our best. It also gives us a scaffolding for when fail, which we inevitably will. We are human, after all.

Covenants are promises to follow, not rules prescribing punishment. Your covenant should include:

1. When and where you will meet each week.
2. Statement of purpose or mission statement.
3. Ground rules: Confidentiality, Accountability, Respect, Commitment, Participation
4. A place to sign the document

Bring this covenant with you each time you meet for the rest of the semester. You can keep it in your pocket or in a book bag, but it should be with you. Feel free to trade this responsibility so you can each experience what it is like to have this document with you.

End by sharing two things for which you are grateful

Week 2: Active Listening

Begin with these questions (5 minutes)

Q: What do I bring with me into our time today? (i.e. are there any emotions that are heavy with you at the moment?)

Q: What do I need to let go of to fully be present with you today?

Active Listening is a lifelong skill that we can forever work on to be more present to those around us. The exercise you do today in your dyad will serve as a foundation for the rest of your semester together. Do not feel that you have to master active listening by the end of today! Each time you gather will be a chance to further hone those skills. In fact, you might even think of moments throughout your week that are chances to work out these muscles—conversations with classmates, a friend from home, or your parent. The point is to think about listening as a verb—not something passive, but something that requires deep attention.

Read this passage aloud from Rachel Naomi Remen’s book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*.

I suspect that the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. And especially if it’s given from the heart. When people are talking, there’s no need to do anything but receive them. Just take them in. Listen to what they are saying. Care about it. Most times caring about it is even more important than understanding it. Most of us don’t value ourselves or our love enough to know this. It has taken me a long time to believe in the power of saying “I’m so sorry” when someone is in pain. And meaning it.

One of my patients told me that when she tried to tell her story people often interrupted to tell her that they once had something just like that happen to them. Subtly her pain became a story about themselves. Eventually she stopped talking to most people. It was just too lonely. We connect through listening.¹⁴⁷

One of the biggest obstacles to listening is thinking about what we are going to say while someone else is speaking. For this reason, you will read the question aloud and take two minutes in silence to reflect on what that question is stirring in you. Each of you will then have 3 minutes to share your response. Follow the directions closely.

One partner will be the designated **teller** and the other the designated **listener**. Then you will switch these roles.

Step 1:

Teller: You must fill the three minutes. Keep talking even if you get off the topic of the question. Your task is to fill the three minutes.

Listener: You are to sit and receive the story without responding—neither verbally nor non-verbally. Do not react to the content of the story, just listen.

Step 2:

Listener: Tell your partner’s story back to them.

¹⁴⁷ Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 143.

Step 3:

Teller: Give the Listener feedback. What did they miss, what did they get wrong.

Step 4:

Listener: Tell the story back to your partner, incorporating their feedback.

Ok, here are the prompts:

1: Tell a story of a time you experienced a deep sense of belonging.

2: Tell a story of a time when you when you did not feel welcome.

Reflection questions

1. What was that like for you? Both listening and telling.
 - a. What was comfortable, uncomfortable, challenging, less challenging?
2. What did you notice in the process/practice?
3. What opened up for you?
4. Reflecting on the content of what was shared, did you learn anything about yourself or your partner that might shed light on the experience of belonging or what goes into this kind of an experience?
5. Is there a way to incorporate this into your everyday?

End by sharing two things for which you are grateful.

Week 3: Examen Walk

The weekly Examen walk is a time to remember that we are always in God's presence. The Examen comes from St. Ignatius of Loyola. It was intended to be a short (15 min) practice at the end of the day to reflect on how God is drawing you in, engaging with you, and challenging you. This twist on the traditional Examen is an opportunity to hone the practice of reflection, listen actively to the experiences of your partner, and recalibrate yourself for the coming week.

You and your partner (s) will leave your phones and other devices on campus and head out on a walk in the nearby neighborhood, pouring back over the week. You might focus on today – this day – or you might think more broadly about your week. Either way, consider the following question: Where did God break through? In small moments, and large moments. When did you turn away from God? What did that look like? This exercise is an opportunity for pause, breathe and reflection. That being said, the instructions to complete while walking aims to embrace the creativity and ease that often comes from being in motion. Usually an Examen is done alone in silence alone, an

internal reflection, but this variation invites you into a dialogical reflection. You may choose to keep some things to yourself. Only share what you are comfortable sharing. Remember, this this is not an exercise in forced disclosure, but an invitation to go deeper in your reflections.

1. For 5 min, walk in silence together. Be attentive to your breath, your need for peace and quiet. Ask God for the grace for openness and authenticity. Give thanks to God for two blessings—one large, one small.
2. Each partner will then take a turn asking the other the following questions:
 - a. Where did you see God this week/today?
 - b. Did you see anyone living a Christ-like witness this week? How did this speak to you? What did it stir in you?
3. Pause for a moment and then ask this question:
 - a. Where did you turn from God this week?
4. Look ahead to the coming day or week. Is there something on the horizon that you see as a possible challenge for staying awake to God’s presence? Is there something you think might facilitate this wakefulness?
5. Conclude by reading this short prayer together:

Always-present God, help me to be present to all who need me.

Help me to be present to those I know too well to actually see

And to those who are unseen strangers to me.

Give me the ability to model your attentiveness, loving gaze

When I view my world, my family, and my friends,

Who are seen and loved by you first.

Finally, may my availability be marked by a desire to be like your child,

Open to being sent

Open to being loved,

Open to becoming love in the world.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ “Service Prayers,” Xavier University, accessed March 7, 2020, <https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer-index/service>

Week 4: Deep Listening to the Landscape – Campus Sentinel

When we walk the same paths each day, thinking of what is next on our schedules and triaging as we go, it can be easy to numb out and miss the beauty around us. This week, your challenge is to shake yourselves awake – come to know this campus in a new way.

Our campus is full of trees. At this particular moment of the semester, they are calling out to us to notice their presence and to learn from them. Trees are sacred. They are sentinels who have been here way before us and will be here long after we are gone. They are growing nonstop beneath the surface, constantly speaking with one another and adjusting how they grow to complement and amplify each other's capacity. As we walk by each day, the trees are living their own lives, standing tall, living in community with one another. They are full of lessons to teach us if we would only stop and be witness to them.

Part 1

You and your partner will silently wander around campus for 30 minutes. Your task is to notice nature in this landscape – specifically the trees. You might choose to pause as you go, to better take things in. You will have to figure out how to communicate with one another without speaking as you make your way through the campus. You might wander through a single nook of campus—engaging a slow deep study—or traverse a larger area. However it is that you are so moved.

Part 2

Discuss the experience with your partner.

- a) What did you notice—on the campus and in the experience?
- b) Did you and your partner see things similarly or differently?
- c) Was there any tree in particular that called your name?
- d) How might you stay awake to this experience of the trees as you head out into your week?

End by sharing two things for which you are grateful in this moment.

Week 5- Sacramental Encounter with Media

Our tradition is full of paradox. Jesus was human, Jesus was divine. The bread is bread and the bread is Jesus' body. The Resurrection is a thing of the past and the Resurrection is an ongoing experience of transformation in our lives. As Christians and as Catholics, our identity is wrapped up in these stories of mystery and in-betweenness where two truths co-exist. Our culture is less agile in these matters—it is countercultural to live into and to two truths at once.

Here is one paradox we all know very well: *technology can limit our connection and technology can enhance our connection.*

Technology can make us feel lonely, when we compare ourselves to others or retreat inward, but it can also bring out moments of profound connection—even conversion and deep theological reflection. How *do* we critically engage our complicated relationship to technology? This tool can connect us in meaningful ways to resources and people all over the world, people who can nourish our spirits and challenge our minds. And likewise, our gifts are more available to be utilized and celebrated when we are connected outward.

Your challenge is to listen to this story together and to stay awake to the transformative power of story and the act of simply watching.

Step 1

Take a deep breath. Ask God for the gift of patience, for the ability to enjoy this story for the sake of its beauty and wisdom. Ask God to release you from any transactional way of being.

Step 2

Listen to the story from the late great zoologist, conservationist, and storyteller Alan Rabinowitz.

<https://themoth.org/stories/man-and-beast> (there is a Listen button embedded in the page)

Step 3

Sit together in silence for 3 min and let Alan’s story sink in. Reflect together on the story. Here are a few suggestions for questions.

- When did you feel wonder or gratitude?
- When did you feel connectedness or appreciation?
- Was there any moments of conversion in this story? (Not only conversion in an overtly religious sense but an ‘about face’.)
- Are there any points of intersection with your own story?

Step 4

Reflect together on the practice of sitting and listening together.

- How is the similar or different from your other media consumption?
- Any insights?

End by committing to a grateful living practice for the week.

Week 6 – Letting Go

Our campus and landscape is covered in leaves. Sure, the amazing Buildings and Grounds team is constantly reckoning with the demands of this season, but imagine if they retired the leaf blowers. The quad would be covered in brown and yellow leaves. Our walkways would be slick—even slicker—in the morning and after the rain. A few weeks ago, I heard a song and it has been stuck in my head ever since – “Leaves don’t fall, they just let go,” by Carrie Newcomer. Taking the refrain of this song to heart, we might think of the many ways God is calling us to let go of that which no longer is serving us. The leaves embrace their own transformation—from little buds peeking through branches, to verdant green, to fire engine red, earthy brown and back into the soil again. What would it look like to embrace transformation like the leaves? What would it look like to glean some leaf wisdom and accept the cyclical elements in our life? What would it look like to trust that those buds of new life and nascent seedlings will indeed come again?

This might not be your preferred genre of music but I invite you to encounter this song in your dyad or triad. Begin with an opening prayer that your heart might be open to the spirit moving.

Step 1: Listen. Please do not watch the video, just listen.

Step 2: Read the lyrics below

Step 3 Listen again.

Step 4: Discussion questions below

Leaves Don’t Fall They Just Let Go

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c4mW9MRe-k>

Leaves Don’t Fall They Just Let Go (Carrie Newcomer)

The truth I knew when I was eight
My dad swam the length of Spirit Lake
It must have been a million miles
This I knew was true

My mother sang while hangin' clothes
Her notes weren't perfect heaven knows
But heaven opened anyway
And this I knew was true

Leaves don't drop they just let go,
And make a place for seeds to grow
Every season brings a change,

A seed is what a tree contains,
To die and live is life's refrain

I left her with some groceries,
Said, "Check the oil and call me please."
She said "Hey, ma I'll be just fine."
This I knew was true

Leaves don't drop they just let go,
And make a place for seeds to grow
Every season brings a change,

A seed is what a tree contains,
To die and live is life's refrain

I've traveled through my history,
From certainty to mystery
God speaks in rhyme in paradox
This I know is true

And finally, when life is through,
I'm what I am not what I do
It comes down to you and your next breath,
And this I know is true

Leaves don't drop they just let go,
And make a place for seeds to grow
Every season brings a change,
A seed is what a tree contains,
To die and live is life's refrain

1. Reflect on a time when you embraced transformation that was lifegiving. What was that seedling moment for change?
2. Reflect on a time you saw someone you love embrace transformation that was lifegiving.
3. Do you see the potential for resurrection in your life today?
4. How might you learn from the leaves?
5. Is there anything you want to commit to parting with in the coming days, weeks, months to make room for new life?

In the coming weeks you will have the opportunity to share the music that is speaking to you with your dyad or triad. Let this week be a way into that conversation. You might reflect on the following as well.

1. What is the role of music in your spiritual life?

End by naming two things about your embodied existence—that is the fact that you inhabit a body!—for which you are grateful.

Week 7 – Sacramental Living

In his essay *Sacraments*, Catholic writer Andre Dubus paints a rich and compelling portrait of the sacramental encounters that make up our day. He invites us to pay attention to the common, unspectacular, ordinary moments of our lives that connect us to the divine. Read the excerpt below together and then follow the conversation questions.

Because I am divorced, on Tuesdays I drive to my daughters' school, where they are in the seventh and second grades. I have them with me on other days, and some nights, but Tuesday is the school day. They do not like the food at their school, and the school does not allow them to bring food, so after classes they are hungry, and I bring them sandwiches, potato chips, Cokes, Reese's peanut butter cups. My kitchen is very small; if one person is standing in it, I cannot make a three-hundred-and-sixty degree turn. When I roll into the kitchen to make the girls' sandwiches, if I remember to stop at the first set of drawers on my right, just inside the door, and get plastic bags and write Cadence on one and Madeleine on the other, then stop at the second set of drawers and get three knives for spreading mayonnaise and mustard and cutting the sandwiches in half, then turn sharply left and reach over the sink for the cutting board leaning upright behind the faucet, then put all these things on the counter to my right, beside the refrigerator, and bend forward and reach into the refrigerator for the meat and cheeses and mustard and mayonnaise, and reach up into the freezer for bread, I can do all of this with one turn of the chair. This is a First World problem; I ought to be only grateful. Sometimes I remember this, and then I believe that most biped fathers in the world would exchange their legs for my wheelchair and house and food, medical insurance, and my daughters' school.

Making sandwiches while sitting in a wheelchair is not physically difficult. But it can be a spiritual trial; the chair always makes me remember my legs, and how I lived with them. I am beginning my ninth year as a cripple, and have learned to try to move slowly, with concentration, with precision, with peace. Forgetting plastic bags in the first set of drawers and having to turn the chair around to get them is nothing. The memory of having legs that held me upright at this counter and the image of simply turning from the counter and stepping to the drawer are the demons I must keep at bay, or I will rage and grieve because of space, and time, and this wheeled thing that has replaced my legs. So I must try to know the spiritual essence of what I am doing.

On Tuesdays when I make lunches for my girls, I focus on this: the sandwiches are sacraments. Not the miracle of transubstantiation, but certainly parallel with it, moving in the same direction. If I could give my children my body to eat, again and again without losing it, my body like the loaves and fishes going endlessly into mouths and stomachs, I would do it. And each motion is a sacrament, this holding of plastic bags, of knives, of bread, of cutting board, this pushing of the chair, this spreading of mustard on bread, this trimming of liverwurst, of ham. All sacraments, as putting the lunches into a zippered book bag is, and going down my six ramps to my car is. I drive on the highway, to the girls' town, to their school, and this is not simply a transition; it is my love moving

*by car from a place where my girls are not to a place where they are; even if I do not feel or acknowledge it, this is a sacrament. If I remember it, then I feel it too. Feeling it does not always mean that I am a happy man driving in traffic; it simply means that I know what I am doing in the presence of God.*¹⁴⁹

1. Discuss your initial responses to this passage.
2. Drawing on Dubus' imagery, what is your "sandwich making moment"? It could be something that has happened just once, or something you do every day.
3. Describe it to your partner(s) in detail.
4. Where is God in your "sandwich moment"?
5. As the listener, what is it like to hear the teller's description? Does it inspire you? Does it cause you to consider your own differently?
6. Considering the other big S sacraments of our tradition, how might these other sacraments inform or shape or enrich your experience of formal Sacraments?
7. Can you imagine a two-way street wherein they are in conversation? What might that look like? In other words, how is God calling you to bring the formal Sacraments into your day to day life and vice versa?

End by naming two things about your imaginative existence—that is, the fact that your religious imagination is a central part of your being!—for which you are grateful.

Week 8 – Spirituality and Music

Creative expression is a doorway to the sacred. Whether our own work or the work of others, such inspiration and innovation reflect back to us the ultimate creative act—God's beautiful diverse creation. This week, you will share with one another the music that is speaking to you in this time of your life. If you have ever been to a concert—in a bar basement or formal concert hall—you know that something happens when we listen together. We share a reality, a spirit of connection, we occupy the same space, syncing up in rhythm and melody. As you play your selection for your partner, pay attention to how it transforms your body and how it stretches your capacity to feel and feel seen. Please bring a device to play your song or songs. Take turns listening and sharing stories about your selections. Here are a few guiding questions.

Step 1: Framing

1. How did you first encounter this song? Name the specifics, get into that space of the first listen, if you can.
2. Are there any people in your life that connect you to this song or that surface for you when you listen?
3. Has your relationship to this selection evolved over time? Are there any layers of experience?

¹⁴⁹ Andre Dubus, "Sacraments" in *Signatures of Grace: Catholic writers on the Sacraments*, ed. Thomas Grady and Paula Huston (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 222-224.

4. How does your body speak to you when you hear this song?
5. In light of our efforts to find God in all things, where do you hear God in this music? How might God be speaking to you through this selection?

Step 2: Listen together aloud

Step 3: Reflect together on what it was like to share the song and receive the song.

Step 4: Trade places and listen to the other song

Step 5: End by naming one intention you will carry forward into this week. It could be inspired by the content of one selection, an insight from your conversation or simply a reflection on the power and wisdom of music. Whatever it is, allow this engagement with music to play in your life this week—allow the echoes to continue.

End by naming one person from your week for whose presence or absence stirred gratitude within you.

Week 9 – Ritual for the End of the Semester

As we head into the end of the semester, we have a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate your time together. Rituals are powerful. They mark us on the inside by physiologically changing space on the outside. In ritual, we cross a threshold, we access parts of ourselves that are hard to reach in ordinary life. That is the point—they are cleansing, grounding, and comforting. You challenge this week is to build a ritual with your dyad or triad in order to mark this moment of transition. I have here a few guidelines but please make it your own.

While you will build the ritual together during your hour, I invite you to each bring two or three items to your meeting to help construct an altar. What has been an anchor for you this semester—a particular book, photograph, scarf, or figurine? Candles are big in the land of ritual! Try to incorporate at least one candle. (There are spare candles in Goddard Chapel should you need to borrow one.) Consider bringing a short reading or piece of music to share with your group and incorporate into the ritual. Also, confer ahead of time to see if there is a specific setting that might ‘hold’ the space for you—you are welcome to use any of the sacred spaces on campus but maybe there is a tiny nook that you have been eyeing all semester.

Step 1: Inventory

When you come together, lay out all of your contributions and share their significance. When you begin to hear these stories, a path for the ritual might become clearer. Remember, the ritual itself does not need to be long. You will probably spend the majority of your hour together thinking about what it might look like and then only a few

minutes enacting it. In fact, some of the most powerful rituals are quite short! Focus on the details and being present, not perfection.

Step 2: Build your altar

Take some time to think about the location of each object on the altar. How might they speak to one another?

Step 3: Create an intention or theme for the ritual

Arrive at an intention/theme as a group. Is there something that is really dwelling deeply in your heart in this moment, or are you looking to re-center yourself with a particular emotion/intention? You might embrace an intention of Gratitude or Peace.

Step 4: Design the Choreography

I use the word ‘choreography’ because it most accurately conveys the rhythms of ritual – it is a dance after all. Create a short outline of what goes first, second, third in the ritual. For instance, you might begin with lighting a candle. This is a powerful way to mark the change of space. Here are a few ideas of ‘dance moves’ to incorporate: short reading, song, blessing yourself or one another, moving pieces on the altar to symbolize a shift within you. Whatever you think will communicate the intention/theme. A few questions to consider: Will there be a time for contemplation or expression of appreciation? How will you inspire a spirit of presence/mindfulness but also celebration? What about your body—will you sit/stand/reach to the sky/dance? How will you close?

Step 5: Enact your Ritual

Final Celebration

Every student in the 72 will come together to celebrate the end of this semester. Bring your altar/rituals with you as you will each have a place to display what you created. Over food, music and conversation we will be present to the gift of this experience, employing a group Examen to take stock of the journey, lift up the wisdom and share the tensions.

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CURRICULUM VITAE





