

Every second Tuesday of the month a handful of other priests and I get together for what's called "Jesu Caritas." This is basically a priest prayer/support group. We start by praying in front of the Blessed Sacrament for an hour, then we have a meeting where we each bring up issues troubling us that month. Afterwards we spend some time socializing, then pray Evening Prayer and go out to dinner. Tuesday is my day off and sometimes I don't feel like going to Jesu Caritas. But I always go because I've learned that I need to have priest friends, people who understand my faith and with whom I can pray and socialize.

"But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" I want to look at that rather haunting question Jesus poses to us. It doesn't seem to follow obviously from the preceding parable. This parable is often associated with the need for continuing to pray even if we suffer from distractions or God doesn't seem to respond. That's an

important aspect of the parable, but I want to apply it to a larger point:  
how can we continue in the faith when we feel isolated and alone?

That Jesus uses a widow to teach about persevering in prayer is no accident. Widows in that age were financially and socially vulnerable, alone, perhaps without families to support them. What does that kind of social isolation have to do with Jesus' question that suggests the faith might disappear before His return?

I've been reading a book by Leah Libresco entitled, Building the Benedict Option: A Guide to Gathering Two or Three Together in His Name. "The Benedict Option" comes from the title of a book by Rod Dreher calling for Christians to intentionally form small communities of faith to support one another in a culture that can be hostile to Christian ideas or ways of life.

And this is done especially for the sake of spiritual friendships, because the World today is full of loneliness. I suppose it's always been so, to some extent, but today, when it's so easy to communicate

instantly, we seem lonelier, more isolated, than ever before, like Jesus' widow.

With that widow in mind, we might think marriage is the answer to spiritual friendship. We might expect spouses to be the ultimate source of our spiritual support. Now, spouses are certainly meant to help one another grow closer to God, but as important as spouses can be for one's holiness, they are not enough. There's also an important role for spiritual friendships beyond one's spouse.

And it's not just married people. How will unmarried Christians, widows, widowers, single men and women, thrive in this World? At my last parish I knew a young convert, a man with same sex attraction who is living a celibate life. He felt that the Church so stresses marriage much that she neglects friendship and so leaves both married people and singles in a loneliness that would have been impossible in past cultures of extended families, small villages, and front porch cultures.

Romantic love can't be the only, or even primary, way we find God's glory and presence in others.

That's where I see my own Jesu Caritas group coming in. Priests can't thrive or become holy alone. We need to talk with, pray with, laugh with, become friends with other priests who are also centered in Christ. But it's not just priests. We all need small communities of several people or families sharing hospitality and the Faith. A basic key to healthy Catholicism in any time, but especially our time when it's kind of weird to be Catholic, is having spiritual friends. This takes many forms, but we all need a place to love and worship God with friends.

That is the basic idea behind our parish Connect groups. (You can go to the website if you would like to join one). But spiritual friendships can form more spontaneously around many activities: a book club, a monthly dinner club, a small weekly gathering of Moms to pray for their children. It could be any group of friends – all you need to do is invite Jesus into the group by prayer, scripture reading, singing of hymns

together, or any kind of God-centered talk, but make hospitality and spiritual friendship the glue that motivates you to meet.

But I'm not naïve. This is really hard to do today. We might assume that friendship is natural, and so just sort of happens. But our society is lonely precisely because it makes us work too many hours, with too many different work schedules, at too many frantic activities, on too many on-line devices, for us to find time easily to be friends together face to face. We must be intentional towards our friends and commit to meet with them even when we don't feel like it that day – like me and my Jesu Caritas group – or we won't have any real friends.

So, to create environments where spiritual friendships can grow will mean work. It will mean we begin in small ways that will be messy and often peter out, but as G. K. Chesterton said, "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly." This is where the widow's persistence comes in. Be persistent for the sake of prayer. Keep trying even if some of the efforts don't come off.

So, back to that original, disturbing question, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” I say “disturbing” because Jesus means it’s a real possibility, or he wouldn’t have said it. Our world is becoming more isolating, but it’s impossible to be a Christian alone. That’s our basic dilemma. In our time and place we need friends to love and praise Jesus with, or our faith will eventually disappear.

Some of the healthiest Catholics I know in this parish are those who regularly meet with a small group of Catholics friends outside their own family and socialize and pray with them. Who do you have that can fill that role? Do you have any spiritual friendships? If you do, re-commit today to doing the hard work to keep them going. If you don’t have anyone, if you are a spiritual widow, then what will you do to make such friends -- because it’s really important?