

## **The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor**

### *Part One: Lament and Evangelization*

By Deborah Wilhelm and Karla Bellinger

#### **Nobody to Call On**

*Does it ever get to you that you have no one to lean on, no one to comfort you, that you're literally your only source of comfort and validation? It strikes when I suddenly become sad or am having a bad day. It's like...I have no one to go to[,] to tell about my bad day. And it would help me feel better to have that connection with someone who actually wants to know how my life is going and wants to be there for me. The only person there for me is myself. And a lot of times I don't even know how to be there for myself. So, I just sit and cry and wonder what to do.*

--Anonymous, from a thread on Reddit<sup>1</sup>

Did you know that there's a Reddit group called "r/lonely"? The person who contributed the heartbreaking words above is part of that larger group, and after this post received a series of follow-up comments from the rest of the "r/lonely" community. But most of these follow-up commenters aimed their remarks less at consoling "Anonymous" than affirming their own loneliness. Even those who offered sympathy, suggestions, or affirmations spoke about their own experiences of loneliness: of being let down by romance, friendship, companionship, or family. The writers of those comments expressed despair, anger, anxiety, even thoughts of suicide.

---

*The only person there  
for me is myself. And a  
lot of times I don't even  
know how to be there  
for me.*

---

The theme of that online thread might easily be this: *There is Nobody to call on.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Reddit is an online community news-and-discussion site, where registered users can post reviews, create conversations, post links to other content, or submit their own original content. User-organized discussion communities are identified by themes—as in this case, loneliness. Reddit is one of the top ten most-visited websites in the world as of this writing.



## Our Lament

The United States is one of the loneliest countries in the world. There is a palpable sense of personal and communal hopelessness. You may know someone (and perhaps many someones), in this position. They are people who struggle to find hope. They aren't part of a religious community, either because they left deliberately, or stopped practicing over time, or have never been part of a faith tradition. Take a moment and think of just one such person, someone you know well, perhaps a friend or family member, who lives in despair, anxiety, anger, or hopelessness. As best you understand their internal struggle, what is it like for this person to feel or believe or think that there's nobody that they can trust to call on?

You may believe differently. You may believe that there is Someone to call on; you may have prayed and been flooded with God's love. You may have sunk into despair and called out from that pit and the Lord of All Kindness lifted you and helped you to stand. And you would like to share the Good News of that Someone. But before you start to give answers, pull out of self and dwell in empathy to ask: What is going on inside this other person? What is their lament?

Perhaps he's still angry about something that happened in the Church. Maybe she's afraid that you'll offer her a series of platitudes, telling her that everything would be fine if she'd just pray more. Still others have found themselves, at family gatherings, becoming the targets of well-meaning aunts, grandfathers, or friends-of-the-family. They're wary. Or indignant. Or detached. Or too consumed by their own woes. Or just not trusting because anything in this AI world can be made to sound true. Or they are too enlightened and consider religion to be superstitious and belief in God to be backward and as scientific people, we should have grown beyond the need for that superstition which has caused so much trouble in this world. That mindset might even make you mad. You may thirst for this beloved friend or family member to be flooded by the love of God. But that encounter is absent. He or she or they have not yet had an experience of God's grace or did not know to recognize it when it did happen. They may have pushed it away. Thus, receptivity to the Holy Beckoning may not be soon forthcoming.

The consequences of spiritual isolation are far-reaching and profound.<sup>2</sup> And just like the person at this chapter's opening whose post on Reddit is so poignant, many people echo this

---

<sup>2</sup> People who have left a religious tradition and have remained outside of religious practice report that they experience more loneliness and more difficulty in their family relationships than do people who have never left



emptiness: *There is nobody to call on. All I've got is me.* We may see these children, women, and men in our newsfeeds; they are on our streets and in our incarceration system; they are in our hospitals, courts, and social-service agencies. We may keep them at arm's length by placing them into "categories" of "other." But they are not just "out there." They are right here, close to us, carrying that burden of emptiness, loneliness, meaninglessness. They may live next door. They may share an office with you. They may eat at your dinner table. They may have money. They may have a nice house and/or a good education. Or they may not. We may know them personally, at school and at work, among friends or family, or beside us at home. *There is nobody to call on. All I've got is me. And that is not enough.*

Pause for just a moment here. Allow yourself to lament. And pray for that person. The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

### God's Lament

God laments for the spiritually poor even more than we do. He has thirsted for his people throughout history. Scripture is rich with examples of God's aching to come close. Consider this passage from Hosea:

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed them.  
I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.  
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them and fed them.  
[...]  
How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender. (Hosea 11:3-4, 8)

---

their religion. See "Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America" from the *Survey Center on American Life* at <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/>.



God's lamentation reaches beyond time and place; it embraces all of humanity—for we are all recipients of God's kind-heartedness. The person you just pictured? God, too, looks at him or her or they with tender care, and longs for their healing, restoration, blossoming, and wholeness. The lament of the Almighty God of the Universe is like the depth of a chasm compared to the cavity of our sorrow.

We lament because God laments first. We are made in the image of God. Theologically speaking, our human cry arises from God's divine cry. If we ache to come alongside others in their pain, it is because we know that pain and death do not have the final word. At some point, we ourselves have been touched by the love and compassion of our own encounter with God.

---

*Our lament arises  
from God's lament;  
our compassion for others,  
from our encounter  
with God's compassion.*

---

Pope Benedict XVI speaks directly to this kind of encounter in *Deus Caritas Est*: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."<sup>3</sup> We may have had that kind of encounter. We want our loved ones to have it as well. As we allow ourselves to lament for them, we draw other people into our circle of compassion. This concern is true whether we are lay persons

walking a lifelong path in pursuit of holiness, or preachers walking that same path while also interpreting the scripture within a gathered community. Our lament, sourced from God, heard by God, and returning eventually to God, motivates us to care for the poor, no matter where they are in our lives.

## **Somebody to Call On**

For Christians, God's compassion transforms us in our times of lamentation and hopelessness. The Trinitarian One whom we call on is a God of hope. When we face despair, the Lord graces us with things that rise from—and nourish—this hope. We lament, we pray, we beg, we plead, we kneel in adoration, we gather in worship or communal support, we experience God through the natural world, we search the scriptures, we worship the God who is so unfathomable and yet who is also so near. This hope is a gift. We did not earn it. We were given it. We long for others to have this support, to have Someone to call on. We lament when they do not.

---

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1.

---

*There is someone  
to call on.  
And this "Someone"  
We call God.*

---

*Nobody to call on.* That's one mindset. It's a common one.  
But as believers, we have another:

*There is someone to call on. And this "Someone," the Divine,  
the Holy One, in the English language, we name "God."*

God is real. Not just a nice idea. Not just a projection of our own desires for peace. Not just a happy thought in times of trouble. God is real. There is Someone who is beyond us and surrounds us and within us and who is *not us*. There is Someone Bigger to call on.

We call on the God who launches cosmic history, carrying out this work from the fullness of his Trinitarian being: the dance, the perichoresis, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> God has not walked away from the created world, but remains purposely engaged in a way that includes each of us individually and all of us together—an involvement continuous from the first sparkling moments of the cosmos. God's plans unfold past, present, and future. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, "[T]he world has been established and kept in being by the Creator's love; has fallen into slavery to sin but has been set free by Christ."<sup>5</sup>

---

*"The Trinitarian Lord is not absent  
from one moment to the next.  
He's in it with us.  
The question becomes,  
How do we view those moments  
and through what lens?"*

---

The Trinitarian Lord is not absent from one moment to the next. He's in it with us. The question becomes, "How do we view those moments and through what lens?"

This is the Holy Spirit who dwells with us in ordinary life. This is the Christ who we celebrate and preach at every Eucharistic celebration, whom we encounter from the moment we first gather at the liturgy. This is the Father of the prodigal son whose compassion for his children to come home is at the heart of our evangelization. For those who despair that "the only person there for me is myself," there is so much more. "Come back to me with all your heart," says the Trinitarian Someone who made us and wants us.

[Stay tuned for Part II: Preaching and Lament]

---

<sup>4</sup> See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 292.

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism*, no. 421, quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 2.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Social researchers use words for religious participation like *unaffiliated*, *disaffiliated*, *nones*, *dones*, *non-practicing*, *non-attending*, *non-observant*, *lapsed* to categorize qualitative data. But how might those terms apply to an individual person? Think about the emotional and logical connotation of each, perhaps even inventing a “character” who might be an example of each term. How is such vocabulary helpful or problematic? Consider the person you envisioned at the opening of the article: Where does he or she fit?
2. What does the word “encounter” mean to you? Share, if you’re willing, about an early encounter with God in your own life. Re-visit the encounter in your imagination. Do you now see any signs that in your moving toward God, God was already moving toward you?

## For Further Reading/Viewing

1. The *New York Times* published a series by the writer Jessica Grose inquiring into why and how Americans are distancing themselves from religion. Her reflections, written from a secular perspective (she self-identifies as a non-observant Jew), are interesting and enlightening. Here’s a link to the first installment (you will find the other four linked here as well):  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/19/opinion/religion-america.html>
2. Even considering the decline of religious observance, atheism is a fraught concept in contemporary US culture. Many people who consider themselves atheists might be reluctant to say so in response to a survey. Other people may say that they believe in God but are in reality “practical atheists” – their mindset and behavior does not reveal any sense of Presence in their lives. Researchers have tried to untangle this issue, and some now estimate that the number of atheists in this country may be quite a bit higher than we have thought. You can read this [article](#) by Gail Hairston, “US May Have More Atheists than Previously Assumed,” in the *University of Kentucky Research News*:  
<https://uknow.uky.edu/research/us-may-have-more-atheists-previously-assumed>