

**Notes for my intervention at the high-level meeting on “Loneliness - Policy options to combat loneliness and strengthening mental health in the EU”**

**Organized by the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union**

**20-21 April 2023**

**Stockholm, Sweden**

***The contribution of Churches in fighting against loneliness and social isolation***

In the first place, I want **to thank the Swedish government** for organizing this event during its presidency of the Council of the European Union; an event on an issue that is of much concern for our society today. Thanks also to the organizers for inviting me to intervene, giving a space to civil society, and specifically to the Churches. I will speak in my capacity as **Secretary General of the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the Europe Union (COMECE)**, an institution of the Catholic Church, with its headquarters in Brussels, that has the mission of officially representing the Church in the European Union and maintaining a dialogue with the European institutions. Though it is true that loneliness is of much interest to me also as clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, I will speak as representative of the Catholic Church in the European Union.

As Churches in Europe, **our contribution to fighting loneliness and social isolation**, is, I would say, is **indirect**, but very effective. It is a by-product, a side effect, of the life and work of the Churches as they comply with their main mission. This takes place mainly at the **personal and community level; and frequently at the very local level**. I will mention briefly **eight actions** that Churches do that help combat loneliness and social isolation, and I say this taking into consideration the scientific research that is available at the moment on the effectiveness of interventions in this field. As we know, the Joint Research Centre (**JRS**) of the European Commission has published very useful documents on this.

1. When the Churches comply with their mission of **preaching the Gospel**, they are also helping to **change maladaptive cognitions** about human person and society.
  
2. When Churches stress the importance **community life and promote it** they are offering **spaces for social interaction** and are giving opportunities for **training in social skills** and for psychoeducation. Churches are also places where one can find **social support**.
  
3. When **Churches reach out to the most vulnerable and marginalized** persons in our society they **arrive to persons and places that other institutions of society do not or cannot arrive**. For Churches **befriending** is part of their mission.
  
4. When Churches **celebrate important moments of the lives of persons**, like birth, becoming adult, marriage, illness, death, they are offering occasions to **live these critical moments together with others**, receiving meaning, consolation and support.
  
5. The **volunteering and charitable activities** that Churches perform are occasions for correcting maladaptive cognitions, for befriending, for doing something significant, for reaching out, for using well free time, etc .
  
6. Churches also live and express themselves in the culture and society where they are; they **are inculturated**, as it is said theologically, and this means that the

attitudes of the society where the persons live, that influence loneliness and social education, are taken into consideration.

7. The teaching of most Churches today insists on **integral ecology**, that is, on the protection of our environment and social justice at the same time, as these are interrelated. This goes against the individualism present in our societies and the tendency of an excessive market centred economy that according to various studies leads to isolation and loneliness.

8. The possibility offered by Churches to have **personal guidance** and dialogue with ministers and people appointed, including pastoral counselling, though it is not a substitute of psychological therapies, is a real opportunity for a one-to-one deep personal encounter.

All these things that help combat loneliness and social isolation, the Churches put in action in an **indirect way**, and this is very important because it avoids the complications related to **stigmatization**. People don't go to Churches explicitly because they want to be cured of loneliness but for other reasons, but in doing so they are put in contact with instruments and circumstances that the research has shown to be effective for this purpose.

One last thing said from the strictly **philosophical-religious perspective**. There is not much empirical research that has been done on the different kinds of loneliness. As we know the operational definition of loneliness is “the perception of a discrepancy between a person's desired and actual network of relationships”. Though this definition is useful it is not the whole picture. There is a kind of loneliness, for example, mentioned by certain authors, like Irvin Yalom, that consists in the “unbridgeable gap between self and others, a gap that exists even in the presence of deeply gratifying interpersonal

relationships”. This kind of loneliness, “**existential loneliness**” as he calls it, that can also lead to mental health issues, needs a different kind of approach and here the Churches have much to say and offer.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.