

My long loneliness and the church's love

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As I prepared to be ordained recently, my mind kept returning to the people in my life who might be perplexed by this decision. I have friends and colleagues who wonder, quite justly, what the church has to offer that one cannot find elsewhere. I thought about how I might describe what pulls me toward ministry and the church in particular.

In my head, I heard two questions: Why this path? Why the church? In many ways, my choice was not obvious—perhaps especially for someone in her 20s. Among many of the young people whose voices I hear, conversation about sources of meaning in their life rarely includes the church. They mention many good, worthy things: authentic friendships, romantic relationships, family ties, political engagement, careers that are both purposeful and humane. Yet they rarely mention the church. Why did I choose it?

My answer touches on what [Dorothy Day](#) described as “the long loneliness.” Throughout my life, even with the love and care of friends and family, I have felt another kind of loneliness—one that hovers just beneath the surface, that settles into my very bones.

There is a world of people whom I do not know, whom I have not met, relationships and connections with people outside my immediate circle that I am missing. I see this lack, from one vantage point, as a tragedy. This is a source of hidden sadness for me, and I would guess for many others as well.

The church, the body of Christ in the world, is one of the few groups I have encountered that is able to respond to this sadness, this hidden loneliness. The church, at its best, is a community where we encounter the depth of God's love—the depth of God's love for ourselves and others.

And it is this love that draws us back into the world more fully. It is a love that can lead us into relationship with neighbors, strangers, and (perhaps especially) our enemies.

This is what the church is capable of being in and for the world: a community where God's love lifts the blinders from our eyes and enables us to look beyond our immediate circle and our immediate interests.

It is this kind of love that led me to ordination. I choose the church because the church is a people and a place where our deeper loneliness can be transfigured into deeper love—where God can transform our longings into love that does not fail.