

## A reflection for the Pope's prayer intention for November

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**Pope Francis Intention for November: People Who Suffer from Depression – We pray that people who suffer from depression or burn-out will find support and a light that opens them up to life.**

During the restrictions and uncertainties of Coronavirus, we have become aware of the pressure that it puts on our well-being. We have also felt for the people who have developed mental illnesses or have been stretched beyond their capacity to cope with them. Seen against this background, Pope Francis' intention for this month is timely. He does not speak in medical terms of mental illness or depression but brings together similar conditions.

He also includes in his prayer people who suffer from burn-out. This refers to our experience of having been for a long time stretched to cope with demanding

commitments that drain us, so that eventually we find that we cannot continue. It is not usually a sign of mental illness, but of our bodies telling us that we can no longer work productively under enormous emotional pressure.

A spiritual malady that sometimes accompanies depression is acedia. Hermits and monks described it as the noonday devil. It began with a thought that made people discontented with their lives. They saw stretch out unbearably before them, made them restless, look for any distraction to take them away from prayer and their work, and finally unable to find delight in or see the sense in anything. The monks described it as it affected their lives of work and prayer, but it is more pervasive. It can attack anyone, sucking out the life and meaning of any activity in which we are engaged. It may or may not be associated with depression and other forms of illness, but it is experienced as another dark and disengaged way of living. Although we desperately need to find light, we do not care enough to seek it.

As this year comes to an end, we call to mind the people who suffer from these conditions. We should pray especially for those who have worked in health services during the time of COVID: vaccinating, testing, treating, tracing, nursing, cleaning, often under enormous pressure, at risk of infection, understaffed, and trapped in uncomfortable protective clothing. When the emergency clears, they will feel the stress of the last years and of the lack of proper support they have experienced. Many may take a long time to recover the energy they need to engage with work and with social relationships.

In all these conditions, the care and support of friends are doubly important. Pope Francis describes the need in such conditions as one for support and the light that opens people to life. When we are exhausted and when life loses its flavour through depression or other conditions and experiences, we usually lack the energy or the desire to take initiative in engaging with friends. We may even resent them for intruding on our solitude. But we need people who will hang in with us and who we know are on our side no matter how unresponsive we are.

In our work at Jesuit Social Services, our hearts have gone out to the people with work in the pressures that COVID has placed on them. Our own staff have felt these pressures, too. We have also seen how vital and lifegiving the ways in which we have found and given encouragement in our accompaniment of one another have been.

The invitation to be light to people suggests a religious dimension to our accompaniment of people who suffer. The good we can do for people comes less through what we say or through what we would like to bring them but through the hope and compassion that we show us in quiet ways. They have become part of who we are. People who light up the room with their kindness have a gift for lighting up the inner darkness of our lives and drawing us to the light.

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