

# Encountering the *Other*

BY ELLEN KONECK

As far as I know, there are two ways to encounter the otherness of others: with curiosity or with judgment. During the pandemic, to survive as individuals and as a community, we have learned to keep our distance. Strangely, we have become like strangers—wearing masks and keeping distance—as a mode of solidarity, a way of being together, of being for one another.

In this sense, **all the ways we've become like strangers are rooted in empathy.** Empathy is the ability to enter the world of another person despite differences, distances, or distinct personalities; the ability to understand another person's thoughts, feelings, motivations, misperceptions and—through this understanding—share and even shoulder those things. In a way unmatched by previous generations, we have actually had the chance to know, more or less precisely, what life might really be like for others in lockdown this past year, because we've collectively shouldered the same weight of uncertainty. If we let it, the pandemic has been one long exercise in empathy.





The Incarnation and the Resurrection are the ultimate acts of empathy. They were God's way of sharing and shouldering our load. That Christ became human means we get to share in divine life too—and while we're still on this side of eternity, that sharing is most significant in the sacraments. Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion, yes; but I'm also thinking more broadly.

I'm thinking of the ways we encounter the otherness of others, with curiosity or with judgment. I'm thinking of the call for empathy embedded in the Christian life as a whole, with Christ as our model. I'm thinking of the way relationships themselves, this encountering, are sacramental.

Perhaps you already know the famous story of the time Thomas Merton stumbles upon

the sacramental nature of relationships when walking in Louisville, which he recounts in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. He becomes overwhelmed with the realization of love for everyone at the busy intersection—the way even despite differences, distances, or distinct personalities, he was bound to and connected with all these so-called strangers on the street corner. His revelation broadens as he begins to realize that this connection to all other humans is precisely the way he is most connected to God too—because God became a member of the human race too. How Merton recognizes his connection to all other people is simple: grace. **That God has taken on our form means that any empathetic encounter is charged with the holy presence of God.** Our relationships—especially those unremarkable, daily ways we care for one another in small and simple ways—may be easy to take for granted. But they are sacraments in the truest sense: channels of grace that allow us to encounter God and be encountered, even through a mask, even at a distance.

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