**The Angels of Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

I have a neighbor who I believe I have never seen drive alone. When she and her husband come to and from Mass, they arrive and leave with a car full of their elderly friends and neighbors – bringing them to celebrate their faith with the family of God in the house of God. To me, this neighbor so well lives the message of the World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly.

Earlier this year, Pope Francis inaugurated the World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly, to be celebrated on July 25th – the eve of the Feast of Saints Joachim and Anne, the grandparents of Christ. In his message for this celebration, Pope Francis announced the theme: “*I am with you always*.”

This theme is a reminder of the nearness of God, His promise that He would never abandon His people, and His particular closeness in times of suffering and isolation. This is comforting assurance from one who makes no unkept promises.

Yet … it is also a challenge. Pope Francis prayed *“May every grandfather, every grandmother, every older person, especially those among us who are most alone, receive the visit of an angel. At times those angels will have the face of our grandchildren, at others, the face of family members, lifelong friends or those we have come to know …”*

This prayer that those who are most alone receive such a visit from an “angel” with a human face is also a call to *be* that angel to others, especially those who are most alone. It is also, perhaps, a call to examine our consciences, individually and as a community, with respect to the love we show our elders.

Glossy advertisements often depict well-dressed retirees on the golf course and on cruise ships; family pictures show well-loved grandparents at the heart of families who love them dearly; world leaders and celebrities in their senior years are lauded as examples of vibrant old age; retirement home brochures feature images of laughing residents drinking wine with gourmet food and abundant friends; and senior groups are often among the most active in many parishes. I am very grateful for the joy that all of these things bring to those who are “ageing well” in the eyes of the world.

And yet … for too many, the later years of life do not look like this. The reality for many is not golf courses and cruise boats, but limited income and lessened mobility. For many, it is abandonment by families who want to remember their elders “the way they were” rather than embrace them as they now are. For many, there are no respected leadership roles in old age, but the harshness of being brushed aside by youth who think a few years of formal education are more valuable than a lifetime of wisdom. For many it is not a happy retirement home, but abandonment in a lonely nursing home – made worse by the solitary confinement imposed by the COVID-19 restrictions of this past year. For many, it is not the joyous comradery of a parish senior club, but the aching longing to be part of the community.

That brings me back to my big-hearted neighbor. The reality is that the later years of life – just like the earlier and middle years – are filled with lights and shadows. One of the darkest shadows is one that need not be inevitable: the shadow of being abandoned.

My neighbor knows that, all too quickly, men and women who were once leaders in their parishes, neighborhoods and families can find it harder to remain at the heart of things without the help of “angels” like her. It is people like her who, in their everyday acts of kindness, make sure that no one is left behind.

They bring those who risk abandonment to the very heart of our parish communities, so they may join their family at the table of the Lord. They bring the nourishment of the Eucharist and the Word of God to those who cannot leave their homes. They bring grandparents and grandchildren together in the bleak halls of nursing homes -- not just the warm glow of the Thanksgiving table. They listen to those who have the wisdom of the years to share and, just as attentively, to those whose memories have been stolen by the cruelest of diseases. They hold the hands of those who are fearful, grieve with those who mourn, shop for those who live alone, call neighbors for no reason but love, and get righteously angry when they see their elders thrown away, ignored, and undervalued. They accompany relatives and friends through the labyrinthine gauntlet of medical appointments, and fight for their elders when they are given up on more quickly than others deemed to have a better “quality of life” in the eyes of an all too utilitarian world.

These “angels” understand that the worth of the human person lies not in what we can do, but in who we are: the same beloved children of God that we are, have been, and will be every day and every season of our lives.

Happy World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly! I hope that it is a joyful celebration. But, I also hope that it is an invitation to us all to join my neighbor in the ranks of the “angels” of ordinary time.

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