**A Portrait in Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Years ago, I was in an art gallery in Amsterdam.

In contrast to the sacred themes abundant in the southern European art with which I am more familiar, the masterpieces of Dutch art have more secular themes. Centuries ago, authorities in the Netherlands disfavored public displays of religious art. Hence, Dutch collections of fine art feature stunningly beautiful still life paintings, landscapes, and portraits instead.

The portraits captured my imagination – as portraits often do. Many were of individuals dressed in their finest and depicted with their homes and their possessions in ways that allowed me to speculate as to who they were and how their long-ago lives were led.

Many portraits were not merely of individuals alone. They were family portraits. These paintings of multi-generational families celebrated the connections that joined individuals together. The portraits honored each of the individuals in the family as children posed with beloved pets and toys while adults were dressed and posed in ways that offered insight into their station and status. Yet, these group portraits also celebrated the family ties that bonded them together.

However, it intrigued me to see that along with the men, women and children who made up the family portraits, there were additional figures in many paintings that I did not recognize. They were small, often dressed in white, and sometimes wearing the clothes of an adult while having the faces of children. They were not exactly angels, yet they looked different from the others in the portrait.

There was a docent in the gallery whose face conveyed the boredom of a long day when no one was asking her questions, and none of us docile art lovers were touching the paintings or taking the flash photos that would have demanded her attention and rebuke. So, I inquired about these diminutive figures in the family portraits.

She told me that they were placed in the portraits to represent children in the family who died in the womb and were delivered, stillborn, into the world or those children who died in infancy. Both of these were tragically common occurrences. The docent touchingly and memorably explained that only by including depictions of those whose journeys through this world were so fleeting could the family portrait, in her words, be *“complete.”* Those not blessed with the years to walk through life with their families were remembered by this artistic convention because, truly, the family portrait was *not* “complete” without them.

As October’s *“Respect Life”* month arrives again, perhaps it is an opportunity to examine the portrait of our own human family. It is a vibrant portrait, full of people from all walks of life, of all ages, and of all races and nationalities, with the strengths, limitations, gifts and flaws that make the portrait so rich with individuals unique and irreplaceable.

Yet... so many are missing from our family portrait.

In the United States alone, since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, well over sixty million irreplaceable people have been taken from our portrait before they were delivered into the world. Similar tragedy unfolds around the globe every single hour of every single day. Those missing from our family portrait are not merely the infants whose lives ended so early – but the children, young adults, middle aged people, and elderly men and women they would have grown up to be. Missing from the portrait are the families that they would have founded, the children and grandchildren that they would have had, the irreplaceable contributions they would have made, and the joys – and, yes, the sorrow, too – that they would have brought to the portrait of our human family had their lives not been ended so soon.

Also missing from the family portrait are, all too often, the very eldest among us who are cast from the portrait when they are at their most vulnerable. In a literal sense, there are family pictures taken every day that do not have elder generations in them because those gripped by weakness, illness, and dementia are no longer invited to join the young, healthy and strong around the family table. At the extreme, a steady drumbeat in favor of legislation that would allow ending the lives of the ill would steal still more from the family portrait.

In between life’s very beginning and very end, many others are also cast from the family portrait because they are victims of a throwaway culture that can discard so many who bear the scars of lives that are hard in a world that can be cruel.

Yet, it need not be this way.

Respect Life Month is an opportunity to acknowledge what those artists from yesteryear knew: our family portrait is incomplete if it does not include all.

It is an opportunity to mourn, humbly and honestly, for all those who are missing from the family portrait. It is a chance to ask ourselves, in the quiet of our own hearts, whether we played a role in making this so by what we have done and failed to do. It is a month to resolve, in every way that we can, to end all those things that keep others out of our family portrait, especially during the sacred vulnerability at life’s very beginning and very end.

Like those portrait artists of so long ago, it is also a time to recommit to doing all we can to make our family portrait “complete.” We are far poorer as a human family because of all those who are missing. In their honor and in their memory we can make a fuller, holier family portrait in this special, sobering month of ordinary time.

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