**The Family of Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

 It is likely that, for many, a significant number of favorite family photos are snapped around a dinner table.

 Among the most joyful of those photos are the ones in which there are new faces around that table – when marriages, births, engagements, adoptions, friendships, and the bonds of neighborliness draw more people, with love, into the family circle.

 Some of the saddest of those photos are the ones in which loved ones are missing. Perhaps death parted them from their families. Perhaps ill health, travel difficulties, competing obligations, work responsibilities, military deployments, canceled flights, limited funds, divorce or other estrangements kept others away. Whatever the reasons, absence brings sadness or emptiness in its wake.

 Then, there are the bittersweet family photos. These are the ones in which there are *both* new faces *and* missing loved ones. These are the ones when there are new people drawn into the heart of the family’s love at the same time that others, also beloved, are not there.

 I have been thinking about this as I anticipate the Easter season, soon to be upon us.

 At the great Vigil of Easter, new sisters and brothers in Christ will join us, fully, around the table of the Lord when we will worship together with that special joy that comes when new members of the family are with us. For months, we have prayed for our catechumens and candidates; for weeks we have met them through the scrutinies of Lent; for much of the past year they have joined us in our parish life, in eager anticipation of the Baptisms, Confirmations and First Holy Communions of Eastertide. As is true of any family, the joy of welcoming new members and gathering to celebrate the Eucharist with them for the first time and after is a source of great happiness and celebration.

 Yet, this joy may be a bit bittersweet if there are also loved ones missing from our celebrations – loved ones who will not be with their parish families for the great celebrations of Easter and beyond.

 Some, certainly, have been separated by death. The realities of this have been particularly painful these past two years as the shadow of mortality has been on the minds of many. For those who have passed from this life, may God bless you as you journey on your way to your true home.

 But so many others are missing from our parish communities for myriad reasons that are as unique as they are. It may be that they cannot physically come to Mass – or can only come with the assistance of others that may be hard to find. It may be that they are burdened by the exhausting challenges of demanding jobs, young children, long hours, or over commitments to other things – even other things that are good. It may be a hurt, pain or bad memory that keeps some afar. For others it may be a single time when a lack of hospitality or an unkind word was just enough to turn them away.

 It may be that because our fast-paced world does not value Sabbath rest as it once did, there is pressure to use Sunday as a catch-up day before a new week begins. It may be a lack of opportunities to learn about the faith – and the difficulty that it is to love what is unknown or misunderstood. It may be the deep struggle of wrestling with a challenging teaching or practice of the Church. It may be guilt about a past mistake, the convenience of viewing Mass on-line, fear of close contacts, or a language barrier that makes participation difficult. It may be disillusionment engendered by scandal or bad example. It may be pressure from friends or family hostile to or skeptical about faith. It may be grief about something so deep it has shaken faith to its core. It may be a million other things known only to God.

 But, the gatherings of our faith communities are poorer whenever someone, anyone, is missing – just as our own families are poorer in the absence of a loved one.

 Maybe, as the Easter season comes, it can beckon each of us to think of one person we know who might be missing from our parish celebrations. We may know that person well, or casually; we may know why he or she is away, or we may not; we may have wise words of wisdom to share, or, more than likely, we may not.

 But, as spring comes, as Covid-19 wanes, and as the greatest celebration of the Christian year arrives, this may be the perfect opportunity to invite someone to join us – not just for the Easter season, but also for the ordinary times to follow. There is no substitute for a personal invitation. Christ, after all, called each of His apostles, individually, by name. This Easter season may give us the chance to call someone by name to join us as our family gathers again to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ.

 The joy of welcoming our new brothers and sisters will be so much sweeter if our churches are filled with the whole family that welcomes them.

 To my new sisters and brothers in Christ – welcome! To my returning sisters and brothers in Christ – welcome back! May God bless us all as we journey together through the joys of Easter, as a family together now and in ordinary times.

 *God bless you and yours as Lent gives way to Easter.*

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