

Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

On the last Friday of March, Pope Francis led the world in an “Extraordinary Moment of Prayer” and an “*Urbi et Orbi*” blessing to a city and a world now ravaged by both a deadly pandemic and the social destruction in its wake.

Typically, an “*Urbi et Orbi*” blessing is a joyful part of Easter and Christmas. The blessings are bestowed not only on the city and the world – but on jovial, exuberant crowds packed in the embrace of St. Peter’s Square.

This time was different. There was no crowd and no jubilation. The millions worldwide who watched the Pope’s prayer and blessing remotely saw a nearly solitary figure in a vast, quiet square speaking to a mournful city and a broken world.

Yet, in his prayer for such extraordinary times, Pope Francis spoke eloquently of the ordinary. In a reflection that caught my ear he said, “[O]ur lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines ..., but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women and so very many others. ...”

This caught my attention because, in these past days, I have also seen how our lives are “woven together and sustained by ordinary people” in just the way Pope Francis said.

I see it in doctors and nurses at the many hospitals in my own city, who work stressful, exhausting and dangerous days. They are risking their own strength to serve others – away from their own loved ones and fearful that their work may endanger themselves and those they love.

I see it in workers at my own supermarkets. Often for minimum wage and little gratitude, they stock shelves, unload trucks, and wearily assist customers even when we complain that we cannot have everything we want when we want it.

I see it in those who clean the building where I live and the places where I shop and the streets where I walk. They do not have the luxury of working from the safe confines of home. Their jobs now call them away from home to do seemingly mundane and underappreciated things that can, literally, save lives in these fraught times.

I see it in caregivers who spend long days ministering to loved ones without the comfort of routine or company in a time of particular fear for those most vulnerable. I also see it in caregivers who spend long days anxious because they cannot be with their loved ones in hospitals and nursing homes where our “new normal” prohibits visitors.

I see it in bus drivers and train conductors whose routes have been reduced but who still venture out to provide the essential lifeline that some still need. I see it in police and fire personnel

whose workload will increase as emergencies rise – and the crisis that brings out the best in so many will also bring out the worst in a few.

I see it in volunteers who, in the span of a few days and a few emails, launched a volunteer network to ensure that elders in my building have someone to do laundry, run errands, get medicines and fetch groceries. I see it in volunteers who check in on those who live alone, bring supplies to health care workers, give blood, and donate food.

I see it in priests who, while separated from their congregations, make extraordinary efforts to remain pastors to their flocks. They livestream Masses, reach out through social media, tape video messages, call on vulnerable parishioners, and make themselves available in so many ways to those whose needs of soul and spirit do not vanish because church doors are closed.

I see it in parents who patiently try their best to homeschool their children, while keeping them safe and unafraid in confusing times. They are learning the vagaries of junior high math and second grade art while, at the same time, trying to master the new educational technology foisted on them.

I see it in the ways strangers smile and friends reach out with the concern that comes when we realize that we are not invincible and that, yes, we all share a frightening, common vulnerability that is part of being human in an imperfect world.

Unexpectedly, I also saw it this week in a sketch that some children left on a sidewalk near my home. In bright chalk, they drew the flowers, butterflies, and odd animals that are the hallmarks of childish art. But one – perhaps an older child with newfound wisdom – wrote with chalk in a stylish flourish “We’ll get through this together.” Amen to that.

When we get through this together, there will be great loss. Some will no longer be together with their loved ones. In his prayer, Pope Francis said, “[i]n the face of so much suffering, we experience the priestly prayer of Jesus, ‘That they may all be one.’” Whether in this life or the next, I hope that the desire to “be one” endures. I am grateful for the extraordinary work of ordinary people who strive to keep us together as one in these turbulent days. And... I cannot wait to embrace my loved ones extra close when we are together again in more ordinary times.

May God bless you and yours with good health and comfort in the days ahead.

Lucia A. Silecchia is a Professor of Law at the Catholic University of America. "On Ordinary Times" is a biweekly column reflecting on the ways to find the sacred in the simple. Email her at silecchia@cua.edu.