

A Hug for Ordinary Times

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

“Do not leave them by themselves. Use the inventiveness of love, make telephone calls, video calls, send messages, listen to them and, where possible, in compliance with healthcare regulations, go to visit them too. Send them a hug.” Pope Francis made this plea on behalf of elders who are facing the burdens of Covid-19 in particularly difficult ways.

Certainly, from a medical perspective, the burden carried by elders is painfully clear. Over 80% of all Covid-19 deaths have been in patients over age 65. The preexisting medical conditions that make an individual more vulnerable are more likely to be found in those who have had more years. More acutely, the staggering thousands of deaths that have decimated the ranks of the elderly living in nursing homes and congregate living settings is devastating.

Yet, it was more than the burden to the body that lay at the heart of Pope Francis’s plea for “the inventiveness of love” (a beautiful turn of phrase!) and a hug for our elders. These ordinary times of our elders have been heavily burdened with grief to the heart as well.

In nursing homes and congregate care facilities across the nations, there are elders who have not been able to see or touch family members for nearly five months. The burden of loneliness and isolation is heart wrenching for any of us – but particularly so for those who may not understand why their families cannot be with them and for those in the last months of their lives. For them, five months may seem more precious than it is for most of us.

In homes across the nations, widows and widowers grieve the loss of spouses with whom they traveled life together – but with whom they were not allowed to be together in the last moments they would ever share on this side of eternity. Elderly parents passed away without their children and grandchildren at their sides, and so many elders find themselves without some of the siblings, friends, and neighbors who filled their lives five short months ago. Compounding this is the reality that so many have had to grieve alone without the funeral rituals that gather us together to embrace the bereaved and console one another.

On televisions across the nations, we hear of plans to return to those things we find productive. We want to know how and when the young will go back to work, return to school, eat out, travel, and enjoy the social and cultural events that tie us together. All of

this is important and good. However, the needs of those who are no longer working, going to school or venturing far from home must always be kept in mind so that no one is left behind if we ever value the importance of what we do over the dignity of who we are.

On screens of all sizes across the nations, many are trying as best as possible to recreate personal and professional connections through technology. Nearly all that we do – birthday parties, classes, happy hours, conferences, and medical appointments – seems to be prefaced by the word “virtual.” Often this is the best we can do, and I am grateful for the technology that allows us to do so. So many who never thought of themselves as technologically skilled – including many elders (and me) -- have made great strides in using new media. However, this shift can also widen a divide that leaves elders behind as a world moves on-line too fast.

In houses of worships across the nations, many have gone months without gathering to worship God together. Even as churches begin to open up, health concerns may keep elders away a bit longer. In a time when families are far flung, it is so often in their churches that elders find a second family and the deeply profound presence of God. Sadly, this spiritual family has also been scattered for a time.

At kitchen tables across the nations, so many of us anxiously calculate our financial futures. For those whose retirement savings are meager and whose income is limited, this future may look particularly bleak. For those who relied for support on children who now face economic woes of their own, the desire not to “burden” others with their needs can be particularly painful.

Into the whirl of these sorrows, Pope Francis urged the “inventiveness of love.” So many of the large questions to be answered are beyond the individual capacity of any of us. However, we have been given the capacity for inventive love – an inventive love we can share with our elders as they bear a heavy load in these difficult days. We can, in so many different ways, so many ordinary ways, find the best way to send a hug.

It has been a century since a similar pandemic swept the globe and I hope it is far longer than that until the next one. However, if a pandemic does rage again when I am old or vulnerable or both, I know that I would want a hug to lighten the load of those ordinary times.

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