

The Companions of Ordinary Times

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

In the panoply of our holidays, National Siblings Day has not truly caught on. It comes around each year, largely unnoticed, on April 10. (Even more obscure is “Middle Child Day on August 12. Given my place in my family, this is of particular interest to me!)

While a holiday is not a necessary reminder to be grateful for those with whom we travel through life, perhaps the unique bond among siblings deserves more attention. Unlike bonds between spouses, children, and parents, very few legal obligations tie siblings to each other. Unlike bonds with friends and spouses, siblings are not chosen. Yet, relationships with siblings are most likely to be the longest of our lives. They often travel with us for the longest stretches of our ordinary times.

Parents share the earliest parts of our journey through life. Spouses, children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and friends may join us along the way. Yet, siblings are the companions most likely to be with us both near the beginning and near the end.

Sacred scripture highlights many sibling relationships. Some, alas, are examples of the very worst in human nature. Cain’s attack on Abel exhibits humanity at its most evil. Esau and Jacob show sibling rivalry in high relief. In the Old Testament, Joseph’s band of brothers rages with the same jealousy that resurfaces when the New Testament introduces us to the Prodigal Son’s resentful brother. Other sibling relationships are more complex. Jesus chose several pairs of brothers to be His apostles. James and John, as well as Simon Peter and Andrew, illustrate the strength that comes with having a brother’s support in a challenging life – and the potential for rivalry when companionship and ambition intertwine. Martha made the all-too-familiar complaint that her sister, Mary, was shirking family responsibilities. Yet, they were united in their grief for their brother Lazarus. In the spirit of sisterly love, they called out to Christ who not only raised their brother back to life but also chose to reveal to them that He was “the resurrection and the life.”

Today, as in Biblical times, siblings play an irreplaceable role. With our sisters and brothers, we learn the fine arts of negotiation and fair play – because they give us plenty of practice. Older siblings give us the scoop on the teachers we will have as we advance through grade school – and younger siblings give us the audience we need for our own profound wisdom on this and other subjects. It is siblings with whom we share the back seat of the car on family vacations, the awkward fashion choices of our youth, the grief

over a bygone family pet, and the holiday traditions that punctuate our common childhoods.

Further down the road of life, it is our siblings whose hands we reach for when our parents pass away – because they are the ones who grasp that pain the best. Sisters and brothers are the ones who laugh at the same memories of a cherished grandfather, who can complete the family stories that the other begins, and who can hear a song, taste a dessert, or smell a whiff of flower or food and instantly be brought back to the same time and place. It is often only a sister who can look at an old family photo and know not only the names of everyone in it, but also precisely when and where it was taken. It is often a brother who best brings back memories of a beloved dad when he is caught effortlessly playing the same game with his son that dad played with him long ago.

My own siblings share my past in a deep and profound way. They share my present life, with all its busy-ness, distractions, geographic divides, and truly epic games of phone tag. I also pray for the gift of growing old with them and having them as my companions to the end of my ordinary times.

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