

Guest Commentary – 731 words

Keeping Elders Connected, a Work of Mercy

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During a recent family reunion my elderly mother and I were the only ones at the table without smart phones. We felt left out. A few days later I read that Pope Francis advised parents to ban mobile devices from the dinner table to help restore the quality of family relationships.

These two occurrences reminded me of the life of our foundress, Saint Jeanne Jugan. In her time the poor were essentially swept aside in the wake of the French Revolution and rapid industrialization. Today we are experiencing a different type of revolution as digital technologies evolve nearly every day.

New modes of social communication, it is claimed, foster unimagined levels of human connectedness. But just as the poor and elderly were marginalized in Saint Jeanne Jugan's day, they are often left behind in the communications revolution of today when they lack the means or the know-how to keep up with the latest technology. Consider these statistics from the Pew Internet and American Life Project:

- While 95 percent of millennials own cell phones, less than half of those over 75 own one. Only 18 percent of seniors own a smart phone.
- Only 10 percent of those belonging to the G.I. Generation own a laptop, compared with 70 percent of Millennials and 65 percent of Baby Boomers.
- Only 27 percent of older adults engage in online social networking.
- Younger, higher-income and more highly educated seniors use the internet more than those who are older or of more modest means. For both groups, usage drops off dramatically after age 75.

Regardless of age, users of social networking say they interact more with other digitally connected people than with those who do not use digital communication. These new forms of technology, with their rapid changes, have created a new generation gap.

Recently I was shocked to read that more than one million older people in the United Kingdom go a month without talking to another human being. This figure would surely be comparable in our own country. Such loneliness is deadly! Studies show that inadequate social interaction is linked to premature death. The increased mortality risk associated with loneliness is comparable to smoking, and twice as great as the risk associated with obesity!

I hope you find this data as startling as I do. Through Pope Francis' repeated calls for a culture of encounter I believe God is asking us to do something to relieve the social isolation of the elderly and poor. During this Jubilee Year of Mercy he is inviting us to practice the corporal and

spiritual works of mercy; among these are visiting the sick and imprisoned and comforting the afflicted.

So what can we do? If you know an older person who has the means but not the know-how to access digital media, then practice mercy by teaching them how to use the technology they already own.

For those unable to afford computers and smart phones, as well as those whose physical or cognitive limitations prevent them from being able to use them, visit them with your laptop on a regular basis and facilitate their connection to long-distance loved ones via Skype or a similar platform.

Finally, enrich the lives of the elderly through real, in-person face time. What better way could there be to celebrate the Jubilee of Mercy than to commit to spending time with our elderly loved ones or homebound neighbors and sharing a meal or a memory with them?

Pope Francis inspires us to practice this form of mercy: “Sharing and knowing how to share is a precious virtue!” he said. “Its symbol, its ‘icon,’ is the family gathered around the dinner table. The sharing of meals – and in addition to food also of affection, of stories, of events – is a common experience.”

The pope added, “A family that hardly ever eats together, or that does not talk at the table but watches television, or looks at a smartphone is a ‘barely familial’ family ... It is like a boarding house!”

Let’s apply the Pope’s thinking to our relationships with elders. Let’s do all we can to make sure that family togetherness and intergenerational bonds grow stronger during this Jubilee Year of Mercy!

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