

‘Let’s get started planning robust celebrations of the World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly.’

By Sister Constance Veit, LSP

I’m almost afraid to say it, but it appears that things are slowly beginning to return to normal in our homes for the elderly around the country.

We recently celebrated Mother’s Day with a loosening of COVID-related restrictions, allowing families to hug their loved ones, hold extended conversations without a window of separation, enjoy a snack together and even take their elderly loved one home for a few hours – all things that used to be taken for granted, but which have been prohibited since the onset of COVID.

Our female residents received Mother’s Day gifts of flowers, sweets and other items from our regular benefactors and people they have never even met. Children sent them handmade cards, and a local musician brought cheer by offering an open-air concert.

Each of these gestures was proof that people have not forgotten the elderly, even though they have been hidden away for so long.

Pope Francis frequently speaks about the throwaway culture and our society’s tendency to marginalize the elderly. While these trends are undeniable, we Little Sisters can testify that countless people from all walks of life continue to show concern for the elderly, even as the pandemic stretches on and on.

In his recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, our Holy Father wrote that no one is saved alone. He reminded us that “young people, adults and our society cannot save themselves without the elderly.”

In order to come out of the COVID crisis better and not worse, the pope said, every society needs to accept its roots and re-envision its values, starting from dialogue with the elderly.

Wishing to show his support for the role of older persons in the family, Pope Francis recently announced the creation of the World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly, which will take place each year on the fourth Sunday in July, close to the feast of Ss. Joachim and Anne, the grandparents of Jesus. This year’s celebration will be held on July 25.

The voice of the elderly is precious, the pope tells us, “because it sings the praises of God and preserves the roots of the peoples.” The elderly “remind us that old age is a gift and that grandparents are the link between the different generations, to pass on to the young the experience of life.”

The World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly fits into the church’s larger vision for the family. In March, Pope Francis launched a year-long celebration of the family to mark the fifth anniversary of his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, *on the beauty and joy of love in the family*.

Among the suggestions on how to “walk with families” during this special year, Vatican organizers recommend pastoral care for seniors aimed at overcoming “the throw-away culture and societal indifference” and the building of “bridges across the different stages of life.”

They also suggest enabling older persons to serve as active agents in the pastoral care of the wider community of faith.

Organizers of the *Amoris Laetitia* Family Year are also encouraging the development of efforts to accompany “wounded families.” This suggestion seems especially timely in light of the multi-dimensional impact of the pandemic.

Millions of individuals and families have been “wounded” by the clinical effects of COVID-19,

the emotional toll of prolonged isolation and grief and the pandemic's devastating economic impact.

Surely no member of the human family has been able to completely escape the suffering caused by this scourge.

Witnessing the wisdom and resilience of our residents during these long months of fear and isolation, I am convinced that seniors are uniquely qualified to support and accompany the wounded through these difficult times.

Even those seniors experiencing the infirmities associated with old age can do much good simply by lending a listening ear, offering words of encouragement or praying for the wounded.

Observing the joyful family reunions taking place at our home during Mother's Day weekend, I realized that the elderly give much more to their families than they receive. It would be wonderful if Catholics the world over would use this year's World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly to celebrate the vital role that seniors play in their families and in society.

Sunday, July 25 will be here before we know it. Let's get started planning robust celebrations of the World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly in our families, parishes and senior living communities!

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