

How to help the elderly and those who serve them

By Sister Constance Veit, LSP

Soon after he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, Pope Saint John Paul II initiated the celebration of World Day of the Sick to show solidarity with the ill and their caregivers, and to encourage the faithful to pray for them. Thirty years later we still celebrate this special day each year on February 11th.

In preparation for the annual World Day of the Sick, the pope publishes a message setting a theme for the day. This year Pope Francis has given special recognition to caregivers: "I think of all those physicians, nurses, laboratory technicians, the support staff and the caretakers of the sick as well as the numerous volunteers who donate their precious time to assist those who suffer."

The pope is encouraging them to recognize the beauty of their mission. "Dear healthcare workers, your service alongside the sick, carried out with love and competence, transcends the bounds of your profession and becomes a mission," he wrote. "Your hands, which touch the suffering flesh of Christ, can be a sign of the merciful hands of the Father. Be mindful of the great dignity of your profession, as well as the responsibility that it entails."

I am grateful for Pope Francis' encouraging words to healthcare workers, for they deserve our admiration and gratitude.

As we enter into our third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I am growing increasingly concerned about the devoted staff in our homes across the country and around the world – and about the widespread shortage of caregivers in the field of elder care. The lack of qualified geriatric caregivers has already reached crisis proportions and is only growing worse.

Older persons living in communal settings have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic, being stricken with COVID at higher rates than younger people, experiencing disruptions in their daily routines and enduring long periods of isolation and separation from their loved ones.

But geriatric caregivers have also borne a heavy burden, often working long shifts in understaffed, uncertain conditions, often while trying to care for their own family members at the same time.

At times frail seniors have suffered due to staffing shortages caused both by caregiver sickness and a significant exodus of staff from many facilities across the country.

In an article published in December 2021, *Skilled Nursing Home News* reported that since the beginning of the pandemic 14 percent of the skilled nursing workforce, or 220,000 care givers, has exited the profession.

There was already a shortage of geriatric caregivers before the pandemic and, with a rapidly increasing population of seniors, experts in gerontology estimate that the need for qualified care staff will increase by 2.5 million by 2030. An inadequate and unstable geriatric workforce will definitely lead to higher costs and serious concerns about access and quality of care.

It has long been said that a society can be measured by how it cares for its elderly citizens, and yet in *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis refers to the "trashing" of the world of the elderly in public opinion.

In another recent Vatican document, we read, "Those living in residential facilities deserve special attention: we hear terrible news about their conditions every day and thousands of people have already lost their lives. The concentration in the same place of so many frail individuals and the difficulty of finding protective equipment devices have created situations that are very

difficult to manage notwithstanding the selflessness and, in some cases the sacrifice, of healthcare personnel.”

Just as the elderly themselves, those serving seniors deserve special attention and support. This can take many forms:

- Lend your voice to advocacy for better training, wages and benefits for long-term care staff, better financing of long-term care and more positive working conditions, including provision of sufficient PPE;
- Take the opportunity to show caregivers esteem, appreciation and gratitude for all they do. Just as we thank members of the military for their service, thank caregivers for the indispensable service they render in society;
- Share with caregivers the message of Pope Francis about the dignity of their profession;
- Foster intergenerational encounters in your family and encourage young people to consider careers in geriatric healthcare.

Finally, this February 11th please join me in praying for an end to the pandemic, for healing for the sick and the elderly and for the transformation of our society into a culture that will cherish every human life, no matter how old or how frail.

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