

Up and down the mountain this Lent

By Sr Constance Veit, lsp

Jesus' Transfiguration is one of the most dramatic scenes in the Gospels. It is a central image of Lent, reminding us that during this season we are invited to ascend a high mountain with Jesus to live a unique spiritual experience.

Pope Francis has chosen the Transfiguration as the theme for his Lenten message this year. Highlighting the voice coming from the cloud, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Mt 17:5), he asks us to listen to Jesus.

"Lent is a time of grace to the extent that we listen to him as he speaks to us" in the word of God, which the Church offers us in the liturgy.

"May that Word not fall on deaf ears;" Francis writes, suggesting that even if we cannot attend daily Mass, we can still study the daily bible readings.

In addition to the Scriptures, he writes, "The Lord speaks to us through our brothers and sisters, especially in the faces and the stories of those who are in need."

So our first task this Lent is to listen to Jesus speaking to us in the Word of God and in other people.

Pope Francis offers us a second Lenten proposal.

Referring again to the Transfiguration, he suggests that we resist the temptation to take refuge in a religiosity made up of dramatic, mountaintop experiences, but that we "go down to the plain" strengthened by these experiences to be "artisans of synodality" in ordinary life.

As I reflect on this theme, I am transported back to Lent of 2020, when we were suddenly thrust into a surreal situation with the onset of COVID-19.

The first weeks of the pandemic, which coincided with Lent, were intense on both the spiritual and practical levels.

Strangers in hazmat suits walked among us in our Home for the elderly and we were forced to bury ourselves under layers of PPE.

As COVID struck more and more Residents, a dark cloud hung over us – a mix of grief and fear of the unknown.

There were also moments of intense light, however.

As we went into lockdown, we were deprived of daily Mass, but we watched it online each day.

We managed to find grace and strength through meditation on the Lenten readings and spiritual communions.

Even as we felt the shadow of death engulfing us, I had a strong sense that Christ was present in the midst of it all – not in his transfigured or risen glory, but in the vulnerability of his passion and death.

I also had a heightened sense of mission, believing that Christ was counting on me to love and serve the elderly to the best of my ability, despite the many obstacles continually posed by COVID.

Regardless of the seemingly dire circumstances in which we found ourselves that Lent, we never doubted the presence of Christ in the person of the elderly, as our foundress, Saint Jeanne Jugan had always said, “Never forget that the Poor are Our Lord.”

Now that the pandemic has largely receded, we have descended the mountain, so to speak, back to a more normal life. Yet we are confronted with new issues indicating that life in our Homes will never be quite the same.

Our greatest challenge is the critical shortage of qualified caregivers to assist us in our apostolate.

Like half of the nursing homes across the United States, our Homes have been forced to limit the number of new admissions because we have not been able to recruit and retain enough staff members to care for the full number of elderly Residents we could accommodate.

How can it be, I often ask Our Lord, that at the very moment when the needs of seniors are greater than ever due to the ravages of the pandemic, and the population of older persons is growing exponentially, there are fewer caregivers prepared to meet their needs?

Individually and as a society, we need to show greater esteem and gratitude to caregivers.

We need to advocate for more educational opportunities and incentives for young people to enter the field of geriatrics, for better working conditions, compensation and benefits, and for care and support for those experiencing exhaustion or burnout.

These suggestions may seem like a departure from our Lenten theme, but I believe that Our Lord is speaking to us through the elderly – whom Saint Jeanne Jugan called the mouthpiece of God – and we need to listen.

As we deepen the ideal of journeying together in a spirit of synodality, let us come down from the mountain convinced that the eldest members of the human family are everyone’s concern.

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