

Walking with Families During the Year of Amoris Laetitia

*Goal #8: Develop programs of **pastoral care for the elderly** (cf. AL 191-193), which seek to overcome the “throw-away” culture and societal indifference and promote initiatives that build bridges across the different stages of life, while also providing opportunities for the elderly to have an active role within the pastoral care of the community.*

The growing trend of isolating the elderly from intergenerational families and society as a whole demonstrates that they are considered undesirable, unappealing, unworthy of our time and attention. However, just the contrary is true: older generations of men and women, grandparents, and senior citizens are the living memory of our roots and history as a nation, as a family, and as a Church, a family of families. The passing of every generation means the loss of a link to the past, rich in history, in valuable lessons, and in treasured stories. Understanding the past and the surprising similarities it has to contemporary events is a great aid in deciding how to live. This, as Pope Francis says, is a contribution that can be uniquely made by the same elderly who are often isolated.¹

It is particularly in families that the love and reverence for older generations should be reflected. Regular gatherings with grandparents, great-grandparents, great-aunts and uncles, and other family members are precious occasions to learn from one another, to engage in life-lessons, share memories of the past, and uphold values that are transmitted from one generation to the next. Ancestry and family trees are educational opportunities to learn a family’s roots in place, time, and culture. All of these elements are important reminders to young people that their place in this world started with those before them.

*“A family that fails to respect and cherish its grandparents, who are its living memory, is already in decline, whereas a family that remembers has a future.”
(Amoris Laetitia, 193)*

Frequently, within families, the cause of isolation or separation is created by a festering wound or hurt. The first step is to heal any particular wounds that separate the generations. This calls for mercy, which always involves the difficulty of dying to oneself. In the case of the person who bore responsibility for the wound (whether parent or child) the painful step of honest self-examination and admission of fault is needed initially. Then it becomes turn of the other party, who suffered the wound, to sacrifice the defensive desire to maintain distance and withhold complete forgiveness for the responsible person, even when that person’s sincere contrition has been made apparent.

¹ *Amoris Laetitia*, 193.

As a society and Church, we should create ways for the elderly to contribute to the community's unanswered needs. One particularly creative method is combining child day care with elder nursing care in the same place. Many working parents have great need of childcare, and many medically able members of the elderly population desire opportunities to exercise their faculties and contribute to the lives of younger generations. As a result, elder generations have the added benefit of collaborating with parents in the care of their children, growing closer to younger generations in the process. These innovative locations have made great strides in answering both desires in a complementary fashion.

Parish communities should foster this reverence for the elderly. As a community of faith, a parish should remember the elderly, bed-ridden, and sick members in the prayers for the faithful at every Eucharistic celebration. The custom of bringing Holy Communion to the homebound is a beautiful way to keep the members of the family of the parish connected with one another. Regular visits to the elderly members of the parish should be coordinated with the parish families and classes of faith formation.

When a utilitarian-based mentality seeps into our culture and determines a person's future based on his or her 'usefulness' – whether this is a small, innocent child or a fully grown adult, we as members of the Church must uphold the inviolable dignity of every human person for their intrinsic value, which far exceeds any utilitarian scope. This is especially true in the area of health care. As a Church, it is important to remind medical professionals that all patients in their care, but especially the elderly, are persons to be cherished, worthy of dignity and respect. If the elderly are considered 'useless' and a 'burden' on society, even medical professionals may recommend that the most efficient solution to a diagnosis is to withdraw natural means of preserving life. While patients and their family members are sometimes tempted to expect miracles, and doctors have to temper those hopes, the experts may have the opposite temptation. In discussing care options with patients' families, they might exert pressure to choose the method that ends life the quickest. This is an expression of the throw-away culture that Pope Francis and prior popes have warned against.² In such cases, "[a] society that has no room for the elderly or discards them because they create problems, has a deadly virus."³

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When faced with end-of-life decisions, providers must manifest a great respect for the elderly and the family members. While it is not morally or ethically necessary to avail of every conceivable medical option to extend life as long as possible, respect for the human person means that providers have an obligation to support and care for each patient as long as life naturally lasts, without hastening its end. This makes it possible for each person to participate in Christ's death peacefully, and not as the result of another person's will.

² Ibid, 192.

³ Ibid, 193.

These are all considerations that remind us of the beauty and treasure of the elderly who live in the midst of our families, our communities, and our Church.