

Legacies in Ordinary Time

(Column 138: May 5, 2025)

By Lucia A. Silecchia

Since Easter Monday when, in the glow of Easter hope, Pope Francis passed from this life, commentators, columnists, scholars and sages have spent many words answering a frequently asked question: *What is Pope Francis' legacy?*

It seems to be human nature, perhaps, to seek answers and to believe we can tell the future with far more certainty than is ours to have. Whenever someone passes away, leaves a job, moves away, or leaves an old role behind, we want to announce what their legacy will be with grateful clarity.

Yet, this is an impossible thing to do.

So often, it is not at the time someone leaves our lives that we know what they left behind – and what it is worth. It is often only with the passage of time that we can know this. It is often only as years go by that we can sift out what was enduring from what was fleeting and realize both what was widely celebrated and all that went largely unnoticed.

When it is a public figure at the center of a legacy discussion, pundits rush to be the ones with the “hot takes.” Yet, at these profound moments, it is important not to let the urge to be timely interfere with more reflective contemplation of the timeless.

As we approach a season in which we will celebrate Mother's Day and then Father's Day, the question of legacy can color these days, especially for those of us who have mourned the passing of our parents. For most of us, our parents were not well known beyond the circle of their family and friends and were certainly not known the world over. If someone had asked me, at the time, what their “legacy” was, I would have mumbled an answer through the grief of the moment, certain that I was not doing them justice.

But now that ten and seven years have passed by, I can begin to grasp what legacy means a little more and in ways that I would not have seen back then.

I see a legacy when I remember good advice received and tucked away, deemed unnecessary at the time but now seeming to be quite wise.

I see a legacy in the letters they wrote, to each other and to me. Some almost seventy years old, they give me a glimpse into lives lived with love.

I see a legacy in the examples of the ways they handled the challenges of life, especially when those challenges took them by surprise.

I see a legacy in the photo albums that stir memories of things I have long forgotten but that now bring the joy of happy recollection.

I see a legacy in remembering what they laughed about and what they cried about.

I see a legacy in the way they are spoken of by those who remember them, individually or as a couple.

I see a legacy in the way their lives have given me insights to share with younger generations of my family.

I see a legacy in the faith they lived and bequeathed to their family.

Traditionally, the word “legacy” did, indeed, refer to bequests and to property passed to loved ones left behind. Often, this can be a slow and time-consuming process as valuables must be gathered, loved ones identified, and distributions made.

So, too, for the more important, enduring and intangible legacies.

As we keep in prayer those who have passed from this life, popes and parents alike, perhaps some of that prayer can also be that we appreciate the legacies they left to us. These are not the short-term sound bites, but those things that surprise us long after we have said our farewells. They are those things that we may have no way of knowing right away but that may only be clearer to us as we ourselves grow closer to the end of our own journeys.

For all who have left behind the good, the beautiful and the true, thank you for the priceless legacies of ordinary time

Lucia A. Silecchia is Professor of Law and Associate Dean for Faculty Research at the Catholic University of America's Columbus School of Law. “On Ordinary Times” is a biweekly column reflecting on the ways to find the sacred in the simple. Email her at silecchia@cua.edu.