

Respecting Life in Ordinary Times

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Nearly ten years ago, Pope Francis recounted a story from his youth. He spoke of a man who lived with his wife, children and aging father. As the elderly father's abilities declined, he started to eat sloppily while dining with the family. His son lost his patience. He got a small table, placed it in the kitchen and left his father alone in the kitchen, at the little table, to dine messily and alone.

Soon thereafter, the man came home to find his own young son constructing a small table. When he asked the boy what it was for, the lad's innocent reply was that he was building a table for his father to use when he himself grew old and would be banished to dine alone.

When I first read this story – and whenever I have contemplated it since – it has always held an exquisite sadness. The contours of this narrative are achingly common. Although the story was told as part of a teaching on respect for older persons, it seems equally poignant for Respect Life Month, observed throughout October.

There are three intertwined tragedies in Pope Francis' vignette -- tragedies worth contemplating this month.

The most obvious tragedy is that of the elderly man. He was a victim of the "throwaway culture" that tossed him aside when he became an inconvenience and required care that was unpleasant or difficult to offer. Sadly, this happened not in a crowd of strangers but within the very heart of his own family. A child discarded before being born, a grandmother in a nursing home who yearns for a visitor, and a person whose mind works differently than that of others can all be, metaphorically, banished away with him if there is no one to embrace them with love.

This month is a time to consider all those who, like the aged man in the story, are tossed aside in a busy world with no time for those who are unborn, ill, elderly, or weak in the myriad ways in which humans experience frailty.

The second tragedy is that of the young boy. Children see and hear everything that their elders say and do, and they learn by example. In this tale, the boy obviously loves and respects his father because he wants to imitate him in all he does. He has learned well and is prepared to grow up to be just like his dad. Yet, how sad it is that the lesson he

has learned is one that devalues a life that is inconvenient when he could have been taught how to serve those in need. How sad it is that he will not have his meals with his grandfather and share the bond between generations that binds families together. How sad it is that, like so many young children, he will be kept away from those who suffer and will spend his youth only with those who are healthy and strong. How sad it is that he may learn these lessons on life not just from a heartless world but from his very own parents.

This month is a time to reflect upon what we teach children about respect for life. They hear what we say but, far more importantly, they see what we do.

The third tragedy is that of the man in the middle who is both son and father. He is not entirely the villain he seems to be. He is, after all, caring for his father in his own home and is providing him with his material and physical needs. He may be struggling with the demands of providing for his own family and may simply be following the examples he saw in his own youth. The story does not go on to report what his reaction was to his son's carpentry project and whether he changed the way he thought of his father. I like to think he did.

He is a tragic figure too. Like so many in the peak of strength, he does not realize that a vulnerable time will come for him as it does for all of us. It is easy to overlook those whose lives are fragile if we do not see how vulnerable each of us is. Yet, I know I was once unborn. If I am blessed with the gift of years, I will grow old. In between, there will be the illnesses and unknowns that fill my life and all of our lives. They may lie just around an unseen corner.

This month is also, then, a time to reflect upon the ways in which those who seem weakest and those who seem strongest are, in fact, linked together as part of the same family.

The theme for the 2023 Respect Life Month centers on "radical solidarity." This begins with radical solidarity with women and the children they carry. To live and witness to such radical solidarity begins with a commitment to turn away from the throwaway culture and to respect life in all of its stages in all the days of our ordinary times.

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