

The love that binds

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World Days multiply like rabbits. So Pope Francis' decision to dedicate the fourth Sunday of July each year (25 July 2021) to the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly comes as no surprise.



Those of us who live in the affluent West, of course, might wonder when we see grandparents associated with the elderly. Many grandparents are in their 50s, and so little more than halfway through their anticipated life's course.

Bringing together grandparents and the elderly, however, might make us appreciate two of Pope Francis' consistent concerns. Because he holds so strongly that each human being is precious in God's sight, and is part of a community that should give priority to their needs, he is distressed that elderly people are often neglected and treated as expendable. The neglect and restrictions placed on them during the pandemic, the lack of government attention to those who live in accommodation for the aged, and the revelations that physical and financial abuse of elderly people are clearly widespread, should give us all occasion to reflect.

In Pope Francis' Catholic vision, the aged should not be regarded and treated as if they are dispensable, like relics or as damaged goods which have passed their use-by date. They have a place of honour for themselves. Their lives are a gift from which nothing that is good is lost in God's sight, nor should be in our sight. Their value does not depend on what they are contributing to society, still less to what they have contributed, but to who they are. And of course, they have a precious place in society because of all the relationships of which they have been part – to families, to workplaces, to friends, to neighbours, to the parks in which they have walked and the beaches swum, to the books they have read and the music they have listened to. Pope Francis speaks often of the ecology of human life – the relationships to the world and to people that shape us. We are of infinite value as person and for the gift we make to others and receive.

Pope Francis' dedication of the World Day to Grandparents reflects also his emphasis on the complexity and gift of our relationships. He broadens our vision of the nuclear family beyond the nuclear family and its economic contribution by reminding us of the significant gift that grandparents and grandchildren are, and how much they offer to one another. These are irreplaceable gifts. At their best these relationships are a blessing to themselves and to their families. They offer variety, affection and enrichment to the relationships that shape a family. They may not be recognised when people give dismal accounts of families in purely economic terms, but they are beyond price. They are emblems of love without expectation, a rare gift.

As do so many of Pope Francis' symbols, his dedication of the fourth Sunday of July to the Elderly and Grandparents points to the importance and preciousness of ordinary relationships that we often overlook.

As with other such symbols it invites us constantly to look at our society through the lens of persons who are precious to us in themselves, and for being bound to us in a complex and delicate set of relationships. When we look at society through their eyes we can then treasure the simple gift of each human life and of the love that binds us together.

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