

Pembroke Diocesan CWL Fall Meeting
October 30, 2021
Father Michael Coyne, Spiritual Advisor

In a general audience in 2015 Pope Francis, quoting his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI, talked about the quality of a society, how it “is also judged by how it treats elderly people and by the place it gives them in community life.” Pope Francis went on to add that “attention to the elderly makes the difference in a civilization.” Pope Francis finished his audience with this powerful statement. “In a civilization in which there is no place for the elderly, or they are discarded because they create problems,” that in reality “this society carries the virus of death.”

This last phrase from Pope Francis in 2015 struck me as prophetic, “the virus of death.” Wow, exactly right, as we all continue to hunker down still in our Post Covid exasperations.

But let’s turn the page to another lifetime ago, when I had the opportunity to live for a time in a country called Ghana a West African country with a diverse geography and ecology, containing both deserts and rain forests. One of the strongest memories that I took away in my experiences living among the Ghanaians was their collective reverence regarding their elderly. The homes I visited and shared table fellowship with literally and metaphorically surrounded their elderly. Imagine an atom with all its electrons circling all around it. That was their family dynamic, their elderly was that atom. Or perhaps a more recognizable metaphor their elders was the super big screen T.V. babysitter that children sit around, like moths to a flame.

The elderly watched and played and taught their children this central nucleus of wisdom and morality, and this reality of just how connected they were to the entire family deeply moved me.

The American philosopher George Santayana is attributed to the saying “those who forget history are condemned to repeat it.” Although this reflection can be painful it is essential on the path to growth. This paragraph was cut and pasted from the Canadian Press and posted on the internet back on May 26th, 2020: “The Canadian military has drawn the curtain back on horrific allegations of elder abuse in five Ontario long-term care homes, with precise, graphic reports of residents being bullied, drugged, improperly fed and in some cases left for hours and days in soiled bedding. Within the military's shocking catalogue of abuse, neglect and cruelty is an accusation that delinquent care led to the death of a resident.” This moment in time arguably the height of the Covid panic in our lives, when life asked each of us who will you be in this moment of the storm, the truth is we all dropped the ball, and failed our most vulnerable in this terrible moment. The government has been jumpstarting it own initiatives to ensure this terrible situation never occurs again but we as a church community must take up this pledge as well. One of the tenants of our faith is the golden rule - “do unto others as you would have them do to you”. As we all look forward to our own collective elderly lived experience; we all hope for it to be one full of love and respect, and to be comforted in the belief that we will be protected in our coming vulnerability. We all have an essential part in shaping the quality of our society in ensuring our elderly are protected respected and loved.