**The Past and Present of Ordinary Times**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

If you are a letter writer, a highlight of Advent is the opportunity to put pen to paper and greet friends and loved ones with Christmas cards reminding them that they are close to your heart in the great celebrations to come. For me, a good cup of coffee, Christmas music in the background, and a stack of Christmas cards and felt-tipped pens is a cherished ritual of Advent.

Along with the joy of card writing, however, is the less exciting task of addressing the envelopes. In years past, I dismissed this as a necessary inconvenience, merely secondary to the joy of writing. More recently, though, I have found an odd but meaningful dimension to this as well.

Before our increasingly smarter phones became the repository for our contacts, so many of us had handwritten books with the names and addresses of friends and family scribbled in them. To this day, I cherish this low-tech record of those nearest and dearest. When I consult it each December to address Christmas cards, I see the history of my life and those whose lives are intertwined with mine. It is filled with the names of those into whose care God so lovingly entrusted me – and whose care was entrusted to me.

There are the names of my earliest friends, listed first under their parents’ home addresses, then at addresses for dormitories and first apartments, and then the suburban homes where they now dwell.

There are the names of those whose names once occupied a single line, until I added the name of a spouse when two became one. Then, I added the names of their children in the margins as two became three or five – or eleven! Sadly, there are also places where two names that once occupied a single entry now occupy two as they drifted apart.

There are particularly adventurous people who seem to change addresses as often as I change shoes and who, thus, occupy more than a single page. There are multiple addresses for those in religious life and in the military whose commitment to serve, in such different ways, carried them to many far-flung parts of the world or to different corners of my own hometown.

There are the names and addresses of teachers who encourage me to stay in touch even decades after I sat in their classes. There are also the names of some of my own students who, decades after they sat in my classes, are no longer students but family friends.

There are the multiple addresses for loved ones who, as they aged, moved from a large home, to a smaller apartment, and then, full circle, into their child’s home.

There are the names of doctors who cared for me and my family through the medical misadventures of the past decades.

There are also the addresses of the parishes and the people in them where I found strength and sustenance in the places I have called home.

 In the ranks of family, there are now addresses for four different generations as members of my own generation – once the youth of the family – now find ourselves moving further up the line as the family grows and new generations enter the world.

My address book has all the sloppiness of crossed out addresses and arrows inserting the names of new people and changed names. This jumble is exacerbated by attempts to add the proliferation of multiple phone numbers. Not all that long ago, a family of five had only one phone number listed in my book. Now, one person I know has five phone numbers of his own!

Yet, as the pages of that book show the changes, additions and movement of so many who are close to me, there is one thing I do not do: I never cross out a name. There are phone numbers I cannot call anymore, and addresses to which I can no longer send Christmas cards. These are the addresses of those who have passed from this world. While everything else is updated as years go by and circumstances change, I do not want anyone’s name to disappear from the book. They may no longer receive a card, but they certainly have my prayers of gratitude. Each and every one of them played and continues to play a unique and irreplaceable role in my life. So, their names remain in my book, just as they remain in my heart.

In a seemingly insignificant and sloppy way, the journeys of my loved ones through this life are captured, imperfectly, in this humblest of history books. Every Advent when I prepared to greet my loved ones, I find in the pages of an old address book the cherished records of those who are making or have left their irreplaceable imprint on my heart. These are the lives and loves that are a sacred gift from a generous God. These are the lives and loves that fill the past and the present of my ordinary times.

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