

The Elders of Ordinary Times

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Late July brings one of my favorite celebrations in the Church year: the July 26th Memorial of Saints Ann and Joachim, the parents of Mary, the Mother of God.

I had some early biases toward this feast. I grew up in a New York parish named for St. Ann. My parents gave me that moniker for my middle name when I was baptized, and I took it again when I was confirmed. My family always celebrated our patron saints' feast days, and I was competitively (but uncharitably) pleased that I had two celebrations rather than one because I was the only one of my siblings to be baptized with a middle name.

However, what I liked the most about this celebration was the thought that Christ – God Himself – had grandparents. I remember my own grandparents with much love and joy. These elders of my family were my roots, my heritage, and a cherished center of my early life.

Most pictures I see of St. Ann (and the oft-neglected St. Joachim) show her, or them, in their role as parents to Mary. They are often depicted teaching Mary to read, celebrating her presentation, or witnessing her wedding. Occasionally, they are added to portraits of the Holy Family, gazing with love and awe from the corner of a painting of their daughter and her family.

Yet, I also like to think of them as the grandparents of God. I wonder whether, in that extraordinary role, they experienced any ordinary times.

When Mary and Joseph were planning to marry, did her parents eagerly anticipate becoming grandparents, as do so many parents-of-the-bride? When Mary told them of the Annunciation, how much did they understand? Was their joy about their grandson mixed with fear? Did they worry, as parents do, when their pregnant daughter traveled to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the “hill country of Judea” or accompany Joseph to Bethlehem while carrying their grandson in her womb?

Did they visit their infant grandson at His birth or His presentation and give their daughter, a new mother, advice on caring for Him? Did they ever watch Him play as a toddler and hear His first words or see His first steps? Did they ever make a special food He liked as a treat or tuck Him into bed at night? In those “hidden” years of Christ’s youth, did they watch Him grow in strength and knowledge? Did they ever have the chance to tell Him childhood stories of His mother’s life as a young girl? Did they speak of Him to their friends and pray for Him when they worshipped at the temple?

Were they still living when their daughter feared for her lost 12-year old and rejoiced when He was found? Was their grandson their final thought and last joy when, after their holy lives, they closed their eyes on this world?

I will never know. But I do know the importance of grandparents. As parents to our parents, they shape the lives of those who most shape our own. They are so often the link to a distant time, a foreign land, and a different life. They are the elders who guard the heritage of a family and who, so often, hold it together in difficult times. When Pope Francis visited Philadelphia in 2015 he said, “Grandparents are a family’s memory. They are the ones who gave us the faith, they passed the faith on to us.”

I am so grateful for the inheritance of faith and memories I received from my own grandparents. I am also so grateful that in the extraordinary way in which Christ dwelt among us, he had the gift of grandparents – one of the greatest blessings of ordinary times.

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