

**We are
Called**

TO HEAL. TO UNITE. TO JUSTICE.



Team Reflection

No. 10 Long-term Care Facilities & Racial/Ethnic Disparities

Juana's family moved her into a nearby nursing home in the autumn months of 2019. They felt a weight heavily tugging on their heartstrings as everyone wanted to keep her in the family home, but the stairs were too cumbersome. Her family hoped the move would only be temporary. Then the pandemic came. As it spread, their frequent visits came to a jolting halt. The virus wielded its wrath, particularly across long-term care facilities, and feelings of guilt, anguish and fear overcame Juana's adult daughters.

Only 5% of all coronavirus cases in the U.S. occur in nursing homes, yet 34% of deaths are from nursing home residents or staff. [10.1] In nine states, at least half of the deaths are linked to nursing homes. Examining the data by race/ethnicity shows that nursing homes with primarily non-white residents, like Juana's, experience 3.3 times more COVID-19 deaths than facilities with the most significant proportion of white residents. In a study of more than 13,000 U.S. nursing homes, the differences in mortality were due to nursing home size, the level of virus spread in the local community and the overall and underlying health of the residents who come to live in the nursing home. [10.2]

The health disparities in the general public carry over into the nursing homes, and racial health disparities in nursing home care existed prior or the pandemic. Facilities with primarily non-white residents are more likely to experience lower quality, lower staffing ratios and more serious regulatory deficiencies. The disparities in care appear to be a function of the facility rather than different staff treatment toward the residents.

Nursing homes and long-term care facilities that are part of Catholic health ministries may likely have fared slightly better. Researchers find the most worrisome disparities occur in for-profit organizations. Even still, our Catholic health ministries must continue to strive toward the vision of our tradition to care for our seniors and those most in need.

In the middle of the last century, Catholic social teaching named health care as a fundamental human right. St. Pope John XXIII included the right to be looked after — to be cared for in old age. [10.3] Striving for this vision is incredibly difficult in our day. Journalist John Miller identifies the challenge nicely: "Overcoming the stereotype that

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the aging are not useful is one of the great battles in the fight for human dignity in a modern capitalist society." [10.4]

Earlier this year, and in light of the pandemic's effects on the elderly globally, Pope Francis added a celebration to the calendar — World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly. This annual event will occur every fourth Sunday in July to coincide with the memorial feasts of Sts. Joachim and Anne, Jesus' grandparents. Francis has marked his pontificate by spotlighting those whom societies have forgotten and marginalized. Among them are those with advanced age. He said the elderly "remind us that old age is a gift and that grandparents are the link between the different generations, to pass on to the young the experience of life." The new feast aims to draw forth the wisdom and dreams of the elderly into dialogue with youth and younger generations. As a Vatican spokesperson said, "In order to come out of the [coronavirus] crisis better and not worse, every society needs to come to terms with its roots and develop a new synthesis of its values, starting also from dialogue with the elderly." [10.5]

Consider

- What might be the dreams of an elderly person who experienced years of historical marginalization or even discrimination?
- Can I imagine myself as an elderly person? How do I hope my family, my neighbors, and society, will look upon me?
- What one thing can I do today to lift up and offer reverence to someone older than myself?

Let us pray in thanksgiving,

*We give thanks for the members of our community long in years.
May they have the loving support of family and friends,
that in good health they may have cheer and joy,
and in poor health, not lose hope.
May they be sustained by God's blessing and our loving care.*

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*We offer our prayer to God who lives and love forever and ever,
Amen.*

Adapted from *The Book of Blessings*.

[10.1] N.Y. Times, Coronavirus tracker "Nursing Homes"

[10.2] Gorges RJ, Konetzka RT. "Factors Associated with Racial Differences in Deaths Among Nursing Home Residents With COVID-19 Infection in the U.S." JAMA Network Open. 2021;4(2):e2037431. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.37431

[10.3] Pacem In Terris: Peace on Earth, Pope John XXIII

[10.4] John W. Miller, "Nursing homes were broken long before Covid-19," America, Feb. 24, 2021.

[10.5] <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-01/pope-establishes-world-day-for-grandparents-and-the-elderly.html>