

Editorial: Should the coronavirus pandemic change our Christian approach to elder care?

In an ideal world – shoot, even in a coronavirus-free world – placing vulnerable adults in facilities for elder care should not be considered a death sentence. But as the nation continues to reel from the coronavirus pandemic, it seems that this is more and more the case. Current [statistics](#) tell us that more than 40% of COVID-19 related deaths in the United States have taken place in nursing homes. Similar – and sometimes higher – [percentages](#) can be found in other countries.

In the past three weeks, the number of people who have died in nursing homes in Indiana alone has [doubled](#), and family members are removing their loved ones from the facilities. They are not the only ones.

On May 22, the federal Department of Health and Human Services [announced](#) that, in response to the virus outbreaks and subsequent deaths at so many elder care facilities, it will distribute \$4.9 billion to nursing homes to help replace lost income so they can provide better care for their residents.

“This is an all-hands-on-deck situation,” said Mark Parkinson, president & CEO of the American Health Care Association/National Center for Assisted Living, in mid-May. He’s right. Nursing homes and similar facilities are in crisis mode, and we must work together to ensure that our loved ones living in them are not sitting ducks as the coronavirus continues to wreak havoc on the vulnerable.

But what might an “all-hands-on-deck” scenario look like when

it comes to elder care? What *should* it look like? If we were to think about it long enough, the answer might make us uncomfortable.

Charles C. Camosy, associate professor of theological and social ethics at Fordham University, [wrote](#) in The New York Times in early May that he was not surprised that nursing homes account for such a large percentage of the COVID-19 death toll.

“Even before the pandemic, these were places where what I call ‘throwaway culture’ was thriving,” he wrote. “The staff aren’t paid a living wage, often have poor training and are hopelessly overworked. The residents face elder abuse, and large percentages of them are desperately lonely. A good number get no visitors at all, which pushes rates of dementia among residents to unbelievable levels.”

We recognize that these comments do not describe all long-term elder care facilities and that many health care professionals and volunteers work hard to create an atmosphere that is pleasant, clean and safe. We also fully understand that there are circumstances in which individuals need the kind of skilled care that can only be found in the best of such care centers.

But the question needs to be asked: Is placing our elderly loved ones into long-term care facilities really the proper Christian response to old age?

On many occasions, including at January’s conference on the pastoral care of the elderly, Pope Francis has [reminded](#) Catholics of our obligation to care for the elderly. Old age, he has rightly told us, is a blessing, and the elderly play an “irreplaceable role” in society and in family life, where they help to pass on the Faith.

Why, therefore, has placing our loved ones in nursing homes and assisted living facilities too often become the default

rather than the exception? Do the sacrifices that we would have to make in order to care for our loved ones ourselves – of convenience, of freedoms, of sibling communication and cooperation – outweigh our family obligation? Especially when it comes to caring for those who – how soon we forget! – put aside convenience and freedom to care for us first?

These are not easy questions to consider, nor are they ones with clear-cut answers. But our current situation is reminding us that honoring our mother and father (or grandparents, or aunts and uncles) could and should look different than what has become our societal norm. Maybe that's a takeaway that could be a silver lining in the midst of the COVID-19 storm.

Our Sunday Visitor Editorial Board: Gretchen R. Crowe, Scott P. Richert, Scott Warden, York Young