Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Ministry



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A year into the global pandemic there are new ways of doing things. We have had to change how we live. No matter how well we've fared, it's been a challenging journey. Milestone celebrations as well as more simple everyday encounters have been missed, and I've begun to wonder about what I've missed. Yes, I can point to "the big stuff" of community gatherings, graduations, birthdays and funerals among others. What I find myself wondering about now are those ordinary everyday encounters.

I teach high school and typically have students for 18 weeks at a time. They come and go quickly and most I never see or hear from again. It goes with the position and it hasn't ever bothered me. This is different.

For years I've attended Sunday liturgy on a local university campus. The church is huge and the congregation fluid, depending on when the students are on campus. In an attempt to feel more communal, there is a group of about 20 of us who sit in the same area. We are by no means exclusive; there is plenty of room for others and "our section" often swells to 75 or more. Our little 9 a.m. group has come to know each other, though. We chat before or after (and yes, sometimes even during) Mass. We've celebrated weddings and births and anniversaries and deaths and other events together. Once we walk out the doors, we go our separate ways until the next week.

As connected as the group is, it also isn't. None of us know more than first names, if that, and we have no contact information for each other. We know very little about each other in terms of living, jobs, hobbies, interests, etc. Our connection is the parish, and as a university campus parish it is by no means a neighborhood group. With the pandemic rules of limited capacity, assigned seating and not everyone having returned yet, the group hasn't seen each other in a year. And the stark reality is we may never see each other again.

I wonder about the now 3-and-a-half-year-old who would sometimes crawl onto my lap to "read" when Mass was getting too long for him. Dad was serving as an altar assistant and Mom was horrified the first time it happened, thinking he was disturbing me. I ignored their efforts to reclaim him and a bond was formed. He was calm and quiet on my lap; it turns out it was easier for me to be attentive to liturgy with him there, rather than bouncing around the pew. His parents both relaxed and probably "prayed better" too, not having to worry about him for that hour every

couple of weeks. His dad was finishing graduate school and looking for a professorship. I don't know where they are and if I'll ever see them again.

There's a young woman who struggles with school because of her different-abilities, a term I prefer to learning disabilities. She started high school in 2020; where and how it's going I don't know. There's the middle-aged couple struggling with some newly diagnosed cognitive decline. There's the elderly couple, always dressed up, who hold hands and go to breakfast at the local diner after mass — they have had some health issues over the years.

And there's the homeless woman; she wanders in late with all her worldly possessions, and wanders out early, always offering a giant smile to all of us as we connect at the sign of peace.

I wonder about the clerk at the gas station up the street. Every week he would wave to me as I fueled the car. My weekly trips to the gas station are now monthly, if that, and I can't remember the last time I saw him. With no self-serve beverages or doughnuts from the oldest bakery in town allowed yet, I can't recall the last time I actually entered the store. I don't recognize any of the clerks I now see through the window.

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There are the members of the choir who gather yearly for prayer and a concert to celebrate consecrated life. Except for the month of practice and the actual event each year, we don't see each other. Yet every year when the group gathers, it's like old friends reuniting. New members are always quickly welcomed and included.

There is the food service staff at school, many reassigned to other schools as few schools are open now, and none in the metro area are at full capacity. And our nightly cleaning crew? They now enter only once the building is empty, so I have no idea if it's the same crew I'd see every night for the last few years.

I wonder about the neighbor up the street. I came home from work to find the medical examiner vehicle parked outside his house. The next day a dumpster appeared and the house had already been emptied by the time I got home. Phil's family has not been seen since. No one knows what happened or how to contact them to offer sympathy.

The list could go on. And I have no idea if any of them think or wonder about me.

There are all kinds of quotes, sayings and memes about living for today, no guarantee of tomorrow, and the like. The older I get the more I know that to be true. But most of us don't live with those thoughts forefront in our minds. We plan for tomorrow, or next week or next year … check your calendar. I always have a well-stocked pantry and freezer so I don't have to shop daily. My lesson plan book has a general outline for the entire semester, not simply tomorrow's detailed plan. My computer files are filled with past and present and future documents. My personal calendar already has appointments throughout all of 2021 and spilling into 2022.

So now what?

The people I've listed, and so many more, may always be questions for me. We may not ever see each other again; that's a harsh reality I don't particularly like but will have to accept. Some of us may reconnect and I hope to be a little more attentive, maybe at least catching a name. And, I hope to be able to keep the new virtual contacts I've made. This year has helped strangers connect unlike ever before. We may not have more than a name on a Zoom screen or Facebook feed, but we've journeyed together.