

Our elders are lonely – do we care?

Free email newsletter

Subscribe



Credit: mrmohock via Shutterstock.



Recent activity:



By [Mary Rezac](#)

Denver, Colo., Oct 18, 2016 / 04:02 pm ([CNA/EWTN News](#)).- It was August in Rome, the dog days of summer, and most people had left the Eternal City for the beach or another summer holiday destination.

It happens every year, essentially slowing the city to a crawl for a good two weeks or more. It can be a lonely time, especially for the elderly who no longer travel.

That's when, on August 2, Italian police discovered Jole, 89, and Michele, 94, a couple living in the Appio neighborhood of Rome. Feeling particularly lonely, having had no visitors for some time, the couple's sobs became so loud that concerned neighbors called the police, who found no crime on their arrival, just two very lonely people.

Besides offering medical assistance, the police decided to offer some comfort as well.



Polizia di Stato



Follow us:

“They improvised a cozy dinner. A plate of pasta with butter and cheese. Nothing special. But with a special ingredient: Inside, there is all their humanity,” the Facebook post from the Italian police says.

Sadly, the problem of loneliness among the elderly is not just confined to the summer holidays in Rome - it is a growing problem around the world.

Earlier this month, Katie Hafner for the [New York Times](#) reported that in Britain and the United States, roughly one in three people older than 65 live alone. In the United States, half of those older than 85 live alone. Studies in both countries show the prevalence of loneliness among people older than 60 ranging from 10 percent to 46 percent.

While not a physical sickness in and of itself, chronic loneliness can also be detrimental to physical health. Several studies show that social isolation or feelings of loneliness can lead to an increased risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke and even an earlier death.

Trending:



Sr. Constance Veit, communications director for the Little Sisters of the Poor, an order of Catholic sisters whose mission is “to offer the neediest elderly of every race and religion a home where they will be welcomed as Christ, cared for as family and accompanied with dignity until God calls them to himself.” They currently operate more than 25 homes for the elderly in the United States, as well as homes all over the world.

Sr. Constance told CNA that the lonely elderly often pine for those who have preceded them in death, or perhaps family members who live far away or from whom they have been estranged.

“(W)e recognize that in a very real way you can never really replace those who are gone, so for most people there’s always going to be an unfilled hole left, so to speak,” she said. “But we do the best we can.”

Sr. Constance said that the Little Sisters and their staff are

always on the lookout for signs of loneliness and isolation among their residents, and that they do the best to connect with them both through group activities and through one-on-one relationships.

“We recognize that we’re not just here to minister to people’s physical or medical needs, but the whole person,” she said.

The New York Times article featured several different service and organizations in the UK that are working to combat loneliness among the elderly. Although similar programs exist in the United States, the research and awareness of the topic in the UK is still much further ahead than it is in the U.S.

“In the U.S., there isn’t much recognition in terms of public health initiatives or the average person recognizing that loneliness has to do with health,” Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology at Brigham Young University, told the New York Times. Her own research has also linked loneliness to deteriorating health.

John Lewis, a British retailer known for its heartwarming Christmas advertisements, partnered with Age UK, a charity for older people, to raise awareness of loneliness among the elderly, particularly during the holidays.

[How an ex-prostitute's horrific suffering moved Pope Francis](#)



[Pope extends Jubilee mandate on abortion, SSPX confession](#)



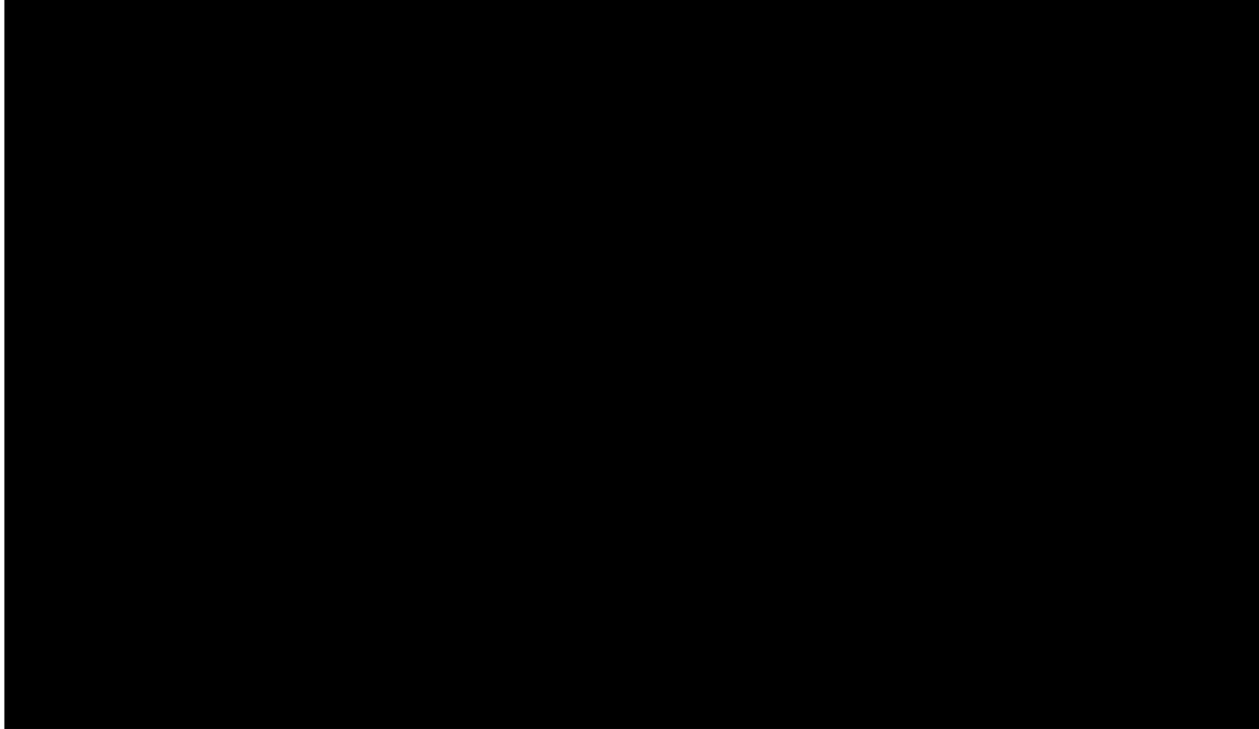
[Watch the new Christmas music video released by the Dominican friars](#)



['The shenanigans' at Mother Angelica's first vows](#)



[At close of Jubilee, Pope Francis says it's a reminder of what's essential](#)



American cardinals reflect after Pope's anti-division comments

In the video, a young girl discovers with dismay that there's an old man all alone on the moon for Christmas. Determined to show him he's not alone, she sends some airborne Christmas gifts his way.

Statistics compiled in the UK have found that a million seniors go as long as a month without talking to anyone. The statistics in the United States are probably similarly shocking, Sr. Constance said.

"To think of an older person going a month without speaking to friends or family, that's pretty bad," she said.

Pope Francis **would agree**. The pontiff once called neglect of the elderly a "mortal sin" after visiting an elderly woman in August who hadn't seen her family since Christmas.

"It is a mortal sin to discard our elderly...The elderly are not aliens. We are them – in a short or in a long while we are inevitably them, even though we choose not to think about it," he said during a general audience in March 2015.

"Children who do not visit their elderly and ill parents have mortally sinned. Understand?" he added.

The Holy Father himself had a very close relationship with his grandmother when he was growing up, and has urged Catholics many times to not neglect the elderly or the sense of memory that they bring to their families and to society.

Pope Francis has said that "we don't have a sense of memory, of appreciation of a family history and family tradition, the things that used to bind the generations together in families," Sr. Constance said.

We've also lost a sense "of filial piety, that we do have a duty to one another in a family and especially to our elders," she added.

Another part of the problem can be that older people who don't know how to use new technologies get left out of the loop, Sr. Constance said. A family that stays in touch through a texting group may be unintentionally leaving out older folks who don't text.

But the blame lies not just with young people - it's a reciprocal problem, Sr. Constance noted.

"The older generation, relatively speaking, of baby boomers also hasn't nurtured bonds," she said.

"They've been much more independent and have had more disposable income and have kind of done their own thing, but when something happens and they become frail, they haven't really set up the networks themselves or those strong bonds, so I think it's really reciprocal...it's just kind of sad, it leaves us all a bit isolated."

Social isolation can also become a self-perpetuating problem. Studies show that, counter-intuitively, social isolation often causes people to go into a kind of defense mode, where rather than reaching out for the support they need, they instead close themselves off further from society.

The most important thing that people can do is to combat the problem is to look for meaningful ways to connect with the elderly in their lives, Sr. Constance said.

"Even if you feel like you don't have elderly people in your life, chances are you do have elderly people in your neighborhood or in your parish, maybe in your extended family of aunts and uncles," she said.

"Reach out to them and relate to them and to create bonds with them intentionally, whether it's visiting them or offering them a ride to church or shopping, or include them in various things," Sr. Constance added.

For those who live at a distance, teaching the elderly how to use Skype or some other technology that would help them stay in touch is also important, she said.

The Little Sisters of the Poor home in Washington, D.C., where Sr. Constance is based, is right across the street from Catholic University of America, which sends student volunteers to the home four nights a week.

While the young people are there to offer friendship to the elderly, it's a very reciprocal relationship, Sr. Constance said.

"Sometimes I gaze out and realize what's really going on is that the students are telling their trials, tribulations, joys and anxieties to these little old ladies, and the students feel listened to," she said.

"So it's very reciprocal, the residents are receiving something from the students, but the students - whether it's relationship woes or academic worries, the elderly are going to listen in a different way than your friends

who have been hearing it all the time. The elderly can really lend a more sympathetic ear to the angst of younger people, and be a great support for them if they would take the time to realize that.”

The Little Sisters in D.C. are also launching an initiative called “Youth & Aged for Life,” a prayer movement for the Gospel of Life that brings together the young and the old.

Strengthening bonds between generations - or what John Paul II once called the “covenant between generations” - is one of the most pro-life things Catholics and Christians can do, Sr. Constance added.

“It’s only by reestablishing that or strengthening (those bonds) that we can fight the temptation for abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide, by bonding together more strongly and cherishing one another’s lives, both the very young and the very old.”

This article originally ran on Sept. 25, 2016.

Tags: [Human rights](#), [Elderly](#), [Catholic News](#)



READ NEXT »

[Indiana mayor draws criticism for renaming Good Friday](#)

Free email newsletter

Subscribe

Comments