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“Filling in” for the Affection of their Families

As in so many places during the health crisis, the residence for the elderly where Rafa works has had to multiply its efforts to care lovingly and professionally for the people there.

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I have worked as a clinical assistant for the past four years in El Rocio Geriatric Residence in Vigo, Spain. During these months of the health

crisis, the elderly living there have been able to stay in touch with their families only through video conferences or telephone conversations, which has led to many difficulties.

We have done our best to “fill in” for the affection they normally receive from the visits of their families, since they need to feel accompanied, welcomed and understood. During these difficult weeks, I have had more present than ever those words of Saint Josemaría: “In children and in the sick, a soul in love sees Him” (*The Way*, no. 419).

My job is to wake up the residents, get them ready for the day, help feed them, do activities with them, etc. But it goes much further than that. We try to show them all the affection we can, which often comes down to looking them in the eye or simply listening patiently to them.

No COVID-19 cases yet

Right from the outset of the crisis, we have tried to follow carefully all the health measures prescribed. Thanks to the quick response here, we have not had any COVID-19 cases yet.

Nevertheless, as in many other homes for the elderly, the quarantine has been a trying time for everyone.

Carmen, a cancer patient, found it hard at first to leave her home and come here. It took a lot of effort to win her trust. One of the things that helped her the most was praying the Rosary, which I usually lead each day at 4 pm. She says she can now face her death calmly: "I can die now, I'm ready," she told me. The next day she was transferred to the hospital and died there.

The people living here realize they are in the last stages of life. They know they have left their home for good and will in all likelihood never

return. And they wonder if they will die with someone to accompany them, if it will involve a lot of pain.... Their greatest fear is loneliness. Many, especially those who rarely receive visits, say they feel quite lonely.

Concha, Jalib, and Maria Angeles

Concha suffers from Alzheimer's disease, but physically she is fine. She requires a lot of attention, since she is often disoriented and lonely. Living away from home for the first time causes her a lot of stress. "Where am I? Are you sure it's all right for me to be here?" she asks me. Concha needs a tranquil and trust-filled environment. So it's important to show her small signs of affection and care. She is grateful when I take her by the hand to accompany her, and help her feel that she is respected and of value.

Those of us working here can't cure these kinds of diseases, but we can care for those suffering from them. I often recall those words of Saint Teresa of Calcutta: "The worst disease is being alone when suffering."

One of my colleagues, Jalib, a Muslim of Lebanese origin, says that also in his religion the elderly are treated with great respect. One day he told me that he sees how the patients with faith are much more serene.

When she died, Maria Angeles, a resident who was a supernumerary of Opus Dei, left on the table by her bed 12 prayer cards of Saint Josemaria. When my colleague, Paul, saw them lying there, he took one for himself and gave the rest to me, since I had often spoken to him about the founder of Opus Dei.

For several weeks now, the residents have been able to receive visits from

their family members once again, and their joy is obvious. But they are still separated by a glass screen and considerable distance, since the health measures continue to be quite strict.

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