Guest Voices
EarthBeat



(Unsplash/Laurene Gicquel)

by Matt Naveau

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My grandma was an amazing woman. She lived to be 93, and I was blessed to know her for 33 of those years. And while Grandma and I never got the chance to talk about caring for creation, she taught me, maybe without realizing it, a lot about what it means to live out *Laudato Si*'.

That realization hit me this summer as I reflected on Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" with other young adults in preparation for the latest Catholic climate conference. It became clear that my grandmother's life and wisdom taught me much of what I need to know to act on this powerful papal document's many messages. Given that, it seems fitting that Francis invited the full church to celebrate a World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly on July 25.

Grandma showed me how to live sustainably, simply and in solidarity with others, with a strong anchor on prayer — some of the core principles of *Laudato Si*' — long before Pope Francis published his 2015 encyclical.

Living a sustainable life

My grandma was a child of the Great Depression. Growing up in a small Ohio farm town in the 1920s and 1930s, the scarcity of the Depression forced her to learn the art of being content with what she had. She didn't call it "sustainable living," but throughout her life, waste was not an option. Throwing away good food or toys or clothes, as our throwaway culture today encourages us to do, was never a consideration.

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Wasting in the Depression meant going without. For Grandma, this meant fixing things rather than throwing them away. Her repaired toys, boxes and Christmas decorations are legendary in our family, especially those old items lovingly reconstructed with strapping tape.

It seems to me that Grandma's "fix first" mentality is something we all need to learn. When "throw away" is our default choice, we fill the Earth with waste; every item we fix saves an item from entering a landfill. Learning from the Depression-formed wisdom of my grandmother's generation, let us all make an effort in our own time to reduce our waste.

Living a simple life

Grandma lived simply her whole adult life. She and Grandpa were both college-educated, and together they rose from the poverty of their childhoods to the post-war middle-class "American Dream" — a house, kids, a car and stability.

Yet their simple lifestyle, formed in the struggling farmlands of their youth, was not changed by the relative affluence they found with my grandfather's job as school superintendent. Grandma's simple living choices were driven by a mindset of "I know where I've come from, and I have what I need."

After a lifetime of simple living, Grandma could have moved to a bigger house or driven a nicer car or bought fancier clothes in her later years. She chose not to, often to the frustration of my dad, who was legitimately concerned about her safety on the steps of her simple house and the holes in her simple clothes that she refused to replace.

For many of us in the middle class, Grandma's perspective is worth our reflection. Do we have all we need now, or do we really need that new item? We can afford to buy it, but should we? Let's take care of ourselves, but let's also challenge ourselves to draw the line on excess. Grandma's perspective on simple living challenges me to this day.



Matt Naveau, then 3, plays Hot Wheels with his grandmother in 1989. Grandma died April 20, 2019 — Holy Saturday — at age 93. Her lifestyle modeled the messages of Pope Francis' Laudato Si'. (Courtesy photo)

Living a life in solidarity

Grandma was an excellent cook and baker. Her pies, cookies and ice cream roll were second to none, and her holiday meals were feasts fit for the celebration. Yet her skills in the kitchen were not limited to her family; Grandma's desire to care for her neighbors drove her to cook and bake routinely for others. A family going through a hard time? Grandma probably dropped off something for them to eat. New baby or a funeral? She probably had a dish there, too. Cookies for a college-bound grandson? Of course.

She didn't call this "solidarity with others" or "feeding the hungry," but that is exactly what Grandma did, never wanting anything in return.

One of Grandma's specialties was strawberry pies made with berries from her backyard patch. True to her character, she ate locally because it was the right thing to do and because it tasted good. It was a sad day when she was forced to switch to commercially frozen strawberries for pies because she and Grandpa had gotten too old to care for their plants.

Grandma's example of caring for those around her with the food that the Earth provided is very powerful. We can do this, too, right now, in our own lives. When we feed the hungry in our own neighborhood and choose food from local sources, we find ourselves answering "the cry of the Earth" and living in solidarity with those around us.

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Living a prayerful life

The anchor of Grandma's life, above all, was her strong faith.

She was a regular at Mass, and her house was decorated with crucifixes and statues of Mary and Jesus in a not-over-the-top-but-help-you-remember-to-pray way. Prayer was something she did regularly. As a kid staying at her house one night, I lay in bed trying to fall asleep. She sat near me, slowly rocking in her chair while clutching her rosary and quietly praying. Eventually, I fell asleep, but the image of her prayer sticks with me to this day.

Humanity faces a big challenge in cleaning up the environment and stopping climate change today. Yet, like my Grandma, we need to pray and rely on God. That prayer will transform us and inspire us to clean up the mess we've made. It's not too late. Prayer compels us to reduce our carbon footprints, to stop wasting food and to think about those around us. Holy Spirit, just as you taught Grandma to pray, help us to pray for one another, for your Earth and for the actions we need to take now and in the future.

Grandma didn't realize she was doing it, but she showed me much of what I need to know to live out *Laudato Si*' today. Through Grandma's examples of sustainability, simple living, solidarity and unshakable faith, she showed me the pieces needed to build a better world.

Thank you, Grandma.

[Matt Naveau is many things: husband, father, Catholic, lay Marianist, engineer and blood cancer survivor. In his mid-30s, Matt lives with his wife and two young children in southwestern Ohio.]



Matt Naveau and his grandmother celebrate his high school graduation in 2004. Grandma's simple living choices were driven by a mindset of "I know where I've come from, and I have what I need." (Courtesy photo)