

# The First World Day of Prayer for Grandparents and the Elderly

When Pope Francis celebrates the Mass in Rome on Sunday that will mark the Church's first 'World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly', the socially-distanced congregation will include a 74-year-old grandmother of ten who was instrumental in bringing this to fruition / By SARAH MAC DONALD

## The art of the grandparent

**CATHERINE WILEY**, founder of the Catholic Grandparents Association (CGA), first proposed that the Church institute a day for grandparents in 2012, in her address at the 50th International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin. Why shouldn't grandparents be honoured by the Church in the same way as young people are with World Youth Day? Then in 2017, the CGA formally asked Pope Francis to set aside a day in the Church's calendar that would recognise the contribution grandparents make to families, society and the faith. The request was made at the annual National Grandparents' Pilgrimage to Knock Shrine, attended by over 5,000 grandparents, and had the blessing of the CGA's patron, Archbishop Michael Neary of Tuam.

When Pope Francis announced on 31 January this year that the Church was going to devote 25 July each year to grandparents and the elderly, Wiley recalls: "I turned to my husband Stewart and said, 'Mission accomplished'. I can die happy now! I can't express the sheer joy and emotion that I felt." She is particularly pleased that the day is being marked just ahead of the Feast Day of Saints Joachim and Anne, the mother and father of Mary and the grandparents of Jesus, on 26 July.

The ebullient and visionary Wiley told me that the celebration in Rome on Sunday "is one occasion I would not miss", despite the restrictions to international travel due to the pandemic. "I look forward to representing all those grandparents from across the world who have prayed for this day and who will be united in prayer, solidarity and love."

**WILEY'S FOCUS** for over twenty years has been to make "the mission of the CGA sustainable and to ensure that grandparents are recognised and nurtured in some way by the institutional Church". Growing the CGA, she admitted, "has been slow and steady rather than meteoric". But, step by step, by dint of her charm, dynamism and willingness to invest her own personal money in the Association, she has seen her vision come to fruition. The CGA now has members and ministries in over 50 countries, including the US, Australia, Canada, the Philippines, Africa, Korea, Mexico, India and Spain, as well as in England and Ireland, where it began. In 2008, in response to a request from the CGA, Pope Benedict XVI wrote a Prayer for Grandparents. It has been translated into 27 languages and into braille.



Catherine Wiley, standing, pictured at Knock in Ireland in 2017

The CGA was founded by Wiley in 2001. Her interest in grandparents' unique role in family life dates from when she and Stewart, her husband of 52 years, became grandparents themselves. The Co. Mayo native met Stewart in London when she was 21. "It was love at first sight." Together they worked hard and built up a very successful business, the Kingswood Group, pioneering educational camps and holidays for children and teachers. "It was a hectic and challenging life. We travelled the world promoting our educational courses and during this time we grew in maturity and faith."

This spurred them to donate some of their wealth to good causes, including providing 275 beds for a home run by Mother Teresa's Sisters in Kolkata and building a church in Siem Reap, Cambodia, for the inspirational Fr Heri Bratasudama SJ. That church is now twinned with the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk.

Catherine and Stewart Wiley brought up their children in Walsingham, a mile from the English National Shrine of Our Lady. One of her formative influences was the faith fostered and nurtured by the Marist Fathers, notably Fr Philip Greystone. "He knew me for 40 years and he mentored me and guided

me from the very beginning. The last 20 years of his life in Walsingham were totally dedicated to developing and strengthening me, which in turn strengthened and gave a solid foundation to the CGA."

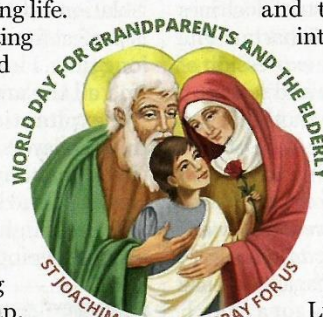
The couple have four children: three girls and a boy, including two daughters from Stewart's first marriage. They have ten grandchildren, who are all, Wiley told me with characteristic enthusiasm, "totally amazing, unique, all with different wants and needs, ranging in ages from 15 up to 25".

She is also an "adopted grandmother" to five Romanian grandchildren. This honour was bestowed on her by some of those she helped at Casa de Copii, or House of Children, at the height of the revelations about Romanian orphans. In the 1990s, with a group of volunteers, Wiley refurbished the orphanage, which had catered for 750 young children, many of whom had died of Aids. She bought three small apartments to accommodate some of the children, and appointed a supervisor to help them reintegrate back into society through decent housing and an education.

"They had no concept of social living at any level and so this was a big challenge for them. Three of them now have children of their own," she explained. Two of the orphans, 16-year-old boys, were brought to Britain, where Wiley paid for their education. She arranged for a monument to be built in memory of the "Lost Children of Romania", 1,433 "beautiful orphans" who had been abandoned in life and then abandoned in death, interred in unmarked graves.

The growth of the CGA is, Wiley believes, primarily because "the time was right and what we were trying to do was needed". She fostered relationships with bishops' conferences around the world, with the Vatican Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, and with individual cardinals, bishops, priests and lay people through events such as the World Meeting of Families and Eucharistic Congresses as well as Grandparents' Pilgrimages around the world. Wiley taps into grandparents' desire to play a role in supporting their children and grandchildren, particularly in passing on the faith.

These days, grandparents are often the only members of a family still actively practising their faith. But Wiley cautions: "A wise grand-



parent knows that you have to let your children find their own way. They will not thank you for interfering in their decisions. You have to learn the art of being a grandparent!"

But has this high-achieving "glam gran" – Wiley always looks immaculately stylish – set the bar unrealistically high for other grandparents? Journalist Liamy McNally from Westport, who worked for Wiley over ten years ago, dismisses such negativity. "I think she is absolutely wonderful," he told me. "She has put her money where her mouth is. Yes, she is a high achiever and she is very glamorous. But she is also great fun and wonderful company. She has been a lifeline for so many grandparents. I've witnessed people at the grandparents' pilgrimage in Knock – a full basilica where is it standing room only – coming up to her to thank her for the support the CGA has provided them."

Wiley tells me: "I have never been offended by the term 'glam gran'. Generally, beauty for me is about what's on the inside. If you are kind, generous and loving then that shines through in your eyes and in your whole face. There is nothing more beautiful to me than seeing a gran or a granddad with their silvery grey hair, embracing their wrinkles and smile lines as a way of showing they have lived life and endured. But equally it's wonderful to see grandparents who want to feel young and stay young for the sake of their grandchildren."

**LIKE MOST** organisations founded on the basis of face-to-face meetings and meet-up ministry, the CGA was plunged into uncertainty during the pandemic. It came up with the idea of a Faith Café, where grandparents from across the world could gather online to chat, listen and be together in a spirit of faith. "Our monthly Faith Cafés are here to stay and are getting stronger," Wiley told me. "Our next step is to develop a six-part series on the Catechism for grandparents. It will be delivered online in the autumn and repeated in the spring." She added: "Grandparents know their faith inside out ... but sometimes they need a little refresher."

While the Covid-19 pandemic has been a difficult time for everyone, Wiley underlines that it was especially so for the elderly and for grandparents who were "starved of time with their grandchildren for so many months". She laments that so many succumbed to the virus. What happened in nursing homes was, she believes, "one of the most disturbing aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic".

"These were real people who had lived their lives in the service of others but who seemed to be an afterthought when it came to their care and protection during a pandemic. This is symptomatic of a world that often marginalises and ignores grandparents and the elderly. It's also a symptom of the ageism that exists in so many places but especially in the developed world. The elderly deserve better."

**Sarah Mac Donald** is The Tablet's Ireland correspondent.

