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We Remember Them

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March 16, 2021

IT WAS A YEAR AGO, on March 11, 2001, that the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 pandemic. Media have abundantly noted the horrifying statistics: more than 2.5 million dead worldwide and more than 500,000 people who died of the coronavirus in the U.S. alone.

But what about the human reality behind those numbers—the humanity of the many who died, and the many millions affected by the loss of loved ones or those who suffered severe economic hardship as measures to combat the pandemic decimated countless businesses? Few remember their name or can tell their story. Most of us have never heard about them.

To help remedy the situation, on March 12, 2021, *America Media* organized a tribute “We remember them: a virtual prayer service to remember those who died of Covid-19.” With this event, *America Media*, publisher of the Jesuit *America Magazine*, made a moving, compelling gesture to throw light on some of the wealth of human richness that perished largely unknown and without acknowledgment.

As Father Matt Malone, SJ—president and editor in chief of *America Media*—made clear in his opening remarks, the group is more than a media company, “it is a Church ministry.” As such, it helped pay tribute to unsung heroes who lost their lives to the virus, leaving behind painful loss in their family, community, and work settings.

The service underscored that the weight of individual human tragedies goes well beyond the statistics, which sound dramatic but fail to do justice to the immense value of the human persons wiped out by the pandemic. Nor do the numbers do justice to the untold suffering the victims’ passing leaves behind—the personal, profoundly human cost behind the numbers. Yet, this is how much of U.S. society marks the one-year anniversary of the pandemic—putting up the numbers yet again and recounting the economic cost, practical measures, etc.

Important as these are, they amount to an impoverished way of taking stock of the wreckage caused by the pandemic. *America Media’s* “We remember them’ spiritual tribute to the victims of the coronavirus was an expression of Christian humanism—an acknowledgment, a celebration of the mystery of human suffering and the infinite depth of the human spirit.



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It is a sad testimony to society's growing indifference to the higher things of reality, to transcendent values that so little is done to capture and acknowledge the sickness, the pain, the isolation, the abandonment, and the lack of compassion experienced by so many victims as the disease ran its course.

In its tribute to COVID-19 victims, *America Media* was decidedly inclusive, saluting: family members "who gifted us with their gentle care, wisdom, and support;" essential workers, who sacrificed themselves for others; teachers, "whose devotion to their students and school communities shaped the next generation of those who will steward life on this earth;" consecrated men and women, "who so desired God and devoted themselves to lives of heartfelt worship and generous service;" friends, "who through the friendship we shared with them showed us the face of God;" migrants, refugees and asylum seekers ... "for all experiencing homelessness ...; and for all who were ignored, forgotten and cast out by their communities—and even their loved ones;" women and men who were incarcerated ... whose dignity was never forgotten by God; and for all those who ministered to them and have died;" and "all who were unnamed and unclaimed who have died, who do not have others to remember them."

In several of these categories of victims, witnesses—family members, friends, colleagues—in words and images introduced and remembered COVID-19 victims whom they loved and respected and whose loss has left them bereft. Dr. Ramon Tallaj, founder and Chairman of SOMOS Community Care, a network of 2,500 independent physicians serving New York City's most destitute communities of color, paid tribute to 12 SOMOS doctors who gave their lives on the frontlines fighting the pandemic.

Dr. Tallaj noted the work of "immigrant doctors" like himself taking on the responsibility of caring for vulnerable people of color in New York City, especially Hispanics who suffered disproportionately from the virus due, in part, to small, cramped living conditions where infections happened readily. More than 8,000 Hispanics died in New York, many of whose names were never known or forgotten. The "We remember them" prayer service acknowledged many of them among the "unnamed and unclaimed."

The prayer service should serve as a reminder and inspiration for churches, mosques, and synagogues across the country to pay tribute—every year—to those in their communities who died of the virus. The same is true for corporations, universities, and other major organizations. For a full and genuine recovery from the pandemic, it is vital to give human face to the brutal numbers and acknowledge and celebrate the human dignity of each of the victims.

Mario J. Paredes is C.E.O. of SOMOS Community Care, a network of 2,500 independent physicians—mostly primary care providers—serving close to a million of New York City's most vulnerable Medicaid patients. He also is a member of the America/Media Board.