



Catechesis on Old Age

1. The grace of time and the bond between age and life

Wednesday, 23 February 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We have finished the catecheses on Saint Joseph. Today we begin a catechetical journey that seeks inspiration in the Word of God on the meaning and value of old age. Let us reflect on old age. For some decades now, this stage of life has concerned a veritable “new people”, who are the elderly. There have never been so many of us in human history. The risk of being discarded is even more frequent: never as many as now, never as much risk of being discarded as now. The elderly are often seen as ‘a burden’. In the dramatic first phase of the pandemic it was they who paid the highest price. They were already the weakest and most neglected group: we did not notice them too much when they were alive, we did not even see them die. I also found this Charter on the rights of the elderly and the duties of the community: this was edited by governments, it is not edited by the Church, it is a secular thing: it is good, it is interesting, to know that the elderly have rights. It will be good to read it.

Together with migration, old age is one of the most urgent issues facing the human family at this time. It is not just a question of quantitative change; the unity of the stages of life is at stake: that is, the real point of reference for understanding and appreciating human life in its entirety. We ask ourselves: is there friendship, is there cooperation between the different stages of life, or do separation and being discarded prevail?

We all live in a present where children, young people, adults and the elderly coexist. But the proportion has changed: longevity has become a mass [phenomenon] and, in large parts of the world, childhood is distributed in small

doses. We have talked about the winter demographic as well; an imbalance that has many consequences. The dominant culture has as its sole model the young adult, that is, a self-made individual who always remains young. But is it true that youth contains the full meaning of life, while old age simply represents its emptying and loss? Is that true? Only youth has the full meaning of life, and old age is the emptying of life, the loss of life? The exaltation of youth as the only age worthy of embodying the human ideal, coupled with contempt for old age, seen as frailty, as decay or disability, has been the dominant image of 20th-century totalitarianism. Have we forgotten this?

The lengthening of life has a structural impact on the history of individuals, of families and societies. But we must ask ourselves: are its spiritual quality and its communal sense objects of thoughts and love that are consistent with this fact? Should the elderly perhaps have to apologise for their stubbornness in surviving at the expense of others? Or can they be honoured for the gifts they bring to everyone's sense of life? In fact, in the representation of the meaning of life — and precisely in so-called 'developed' cultures — old age has little incidence. Why? Because it is regarded as an age that has no special content to offer, nor meaning of its own to live. Moreover, there is a lack of encouragement for people to seek them out, and there is a lack of education for the community to recognise them. In short, for an age that is now a decisive part of the community space and extends to a third of the entire life span, there are — at times — care plans, but not projects of existence. Care plans, yes; but not plans to let them live to the full. And this is a void of thought, of imagination and of creativity. Underneath this [way of thinking], what makes a vacuum is that the elderly are throwaway material: in this throwaway culture, the elderly are like throwaway material.

Youth is beautiful, but eternal youth is a very dangerous hallucination. Being old is just as important — and beautiful — it is equally important as being young. Let us remember this. The alliance between generations, which restores all ages of life to the human, is our lost gift and we have to get it back. It must be found, in this throwaway culture and in this culture of productivity.

The Word of God has much to say about this covenant. A short while ago, we heard the prophecy of Joel: “your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions” (2:28). It can be interpreted as follows: when the elderly resist the Spirit, burying their dreams in the past, the young can no longer see the things that must be done to open up the future. When, on the other hand, the old communicate their dreams, the young see clearly what they have to do. Young people who no longer question the dreams of the old, aiming headlong at visions

that do not go beyond their noses, will struggle to carry their present and bear their future. If grandparents fall back on their melancholies, young people will look even more to their smartphones. The screen may stay on, but life will die out before its time. Isn't the most serious backlash of the pandemic precisely in the sense of loss of the young? The old have resources of life already lived that they can call upon at any moment. Will they stand by and watch young people lose their vision, or will they accompany them by warming their dreams? Faced with the dreams of the old, what will the young do?

The wisdom of the long journey that accompanies old age to its close must be experienced as an offer of meaning to life, not consumed as the inertia of its survival. If old age is not restored to the dignity of a humanly worthy life, it is destined to close itself off in a despondency that robs everyone of love. This challenge of humanity and civilisation requires our commitment and God's help. Let us ask the Holy Spirit for this. With these catecheses on old age, I would like to encourage everyone to invest their thoughts and affections in the gifts it carries with it and to the other stages of life. Old age is a gift for all stages of life. It is a gift of maturity, of wisdom. The Word of God will help us discern the meaning and value of old age; may the Holy Spirit grant us too the dreams and visions we need.

And I would like to emphasise, as we heard in the prophecy of Joel at the beginning, that the important thing is not only that the elderly occupy the place of wisdom they have, of lived history in society, but also that there be a conversation, that they talk to the young. The young must converse with the elderly, and the elderly with the young. And this bridge will be the transmission of wisdom in humanity. I hope that these reflections will be of use to all of us, in order to carry forward this reality that the prophet Joel spoke about, that in the dialogue between the young and the elderly, the elderly can provide dreams and the young can receive them and carry them forward. Let us not forget that in both family and social culture, the elderly are like the roots of a tree: they have all the history there, and the young are like the flowers and the fruit. If the juice does not come, if this 'drip' — let's say — does not come from the roots, they will never be able to flourish. Let us not forget the poet I mentioned many times: "That the blossoms on the tree/Draw life from what lies buried beneath", (Francisco Luis Bernárdez). Everything beautiful that a society has is related to the roots of the elderly. For this reason, in these catecheses, I would like the figure of the elderly to be highlighted, so that it be well understood that the elderly are not throwaway material: they are a blessing for society.



World Day
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2. Longevity: symbol and opportunity

Wednesday, 2 March 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In the Bible account of the genealogy of the ancestors, one is immediately struck by their tremendous longevity: we are talking about centuries! When does old age begin here, we wonder? And what is the meaning behind the fact that these ancient fathers lived so long after fathering their children? Fathers and sons living together for centuries! This passage of time in terms of centuries, narrated in a ritual style, confers a strong, very strong symbolic meaning to the relationship between longevity and genealogy.

It is as though the transmission of human life, so new in the created universe, demanded a slow and prolonged initiation. Everything is new at the beginnings of the history of a creature who is spirit and life, conscience and freedom, sensibility and responsibility. New life — human life — immersed in the tension between its origin “in the image and likeness” of God, and the fragility of its mortal condition, represents a novelty to be discovered. And it requires a long initiation period, in which mutual support among generations is indispensable in order to decipher experiences and confront the enigmas of life. During this long time, the spiritual quality of man is also slowly cultivated.

In a certain sense, every passing epoch in human history offers this feeling again: it is as if we have to begin again to calmly ask our questions on the meaning of life, when the scenario of the human condition appears crowded with new experiences and hitherto unasked questions. Certainly, the accumulation of cultural memory increases the familiarity needed to face new transitions. The times of transmission are reduced, but the times of assimilation always require patience. The excess of haste, which by now obsesses every stage of our life, makes every experience more superficial and less “nourishing”. Young people are unconscious victims of this split between the time on the clock that demands to be rushed, and



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the times of life that require proper “leavening”. A long life enables these long times and the damages of haste to be experienced.

Old age certainly imposes a slower pace: but it is not merely a time of inertia. Indeed, the measure of these rhythms opens up, for all, spaces of meaning of life, unheard of by the obsession with haste. Losing contact with the slower rhythms of old age closes up these spaces to everyone. It is from this perspective that I wished to establish the feast of grandparents on the last Sunday of July. The covenant between the two poles of the generations of life — children and the elderly — also helps the other two — young people and adults — to bond with each other so as to make everyone’s existence richer in humanity.

Dialogue between the generations is necessary. If there is no dialogue between young people and the elderly, if there is no dialogue, then each generation remains isolated and cannot transmit the message. A young person who is not bonded to his or her roots, which are the grandparents, does not receive the strength, — like a tree gets its strength from the roots — and grows up badly, grows up sick, grows up without points of reference. This is why it is necessary to seek a dialogue between the generations, as a human need. And this dialogue is important especially between grandparents and grandchildren, who are the two extremes.

Let us imagine a city in which co-existence among the different ages forms an integral part of the overall plan of its habitat. Let us think about building affectionate relationships between old age and youth that radiate onto the overall style of relationships. The overlapping of the generations would become a source of energy for a truly visible and liveable humanism. Modern cities tend to be hostile to the elderly (and, not by chance, also to children). This society that has this throwaway spirit and rejects many unwanted children, it rejects the elderly: it casts them aside — they are of no use — and puts them in rest homes, hospitalized. Excess haste puts us in a blender that throws us away like confetti. One completely loses sight of the overall picture. Each person holds on to his or her own piece, floating on the currents of the city-market, for which a slower pace means losses and haste is money. The excess of haste pulverizes life: it does not make it more intense. And wisdom requires “wasting time”. When you return home and see your son, your daughter, and you “waste time”, this conversation is fundamental for society. When you return home and there is a grandfather or grandmother who is perhaps no longer lucid or, I don’t know, has lost some of their ability to speak, and you stay with him or with her, you are “wasting time”, but this “waste of time” strengthens the human family. It is necessary to spend time, time that is not

lucrative, with children and with the elderly, because they give us another ability to see life.

The pandemic, in which we are still forced to live, has imposed – very painfully, unfortunately – a halt to the obtuse cult of haste. And in this period, grandparents have acted as a barrier to the emotional “dehydration” of the youngest. The visible covenant of the generations which harmonizes paces and rhythms, restores to us the hope of not living life in vain. And it restores to each of us the love for our vulnerable lives, blocking the way to the obsession with haste, which simply consumes it. The key word here is wasting time. I ask each one of you: do you know how to waste time, or are you always in a hurry? “No, I’m in a rush, I can’t...”. Do you know how to waste time with grandparents, with the elderly? Do you know how to spend time playing with your children, with children? This is the touchstone. Think about it. And this restores to each person our love for our vulnerable life, blocking, as I said, the road to obsession with haste, which just consumes it. The rhythms of old age are an indispensable resource for grasping the meaning of life marked by time. The elderly have their rhythms, but they are rhythms that help us. Thanks to this mediation, the destination of life in the encounter with God becomes more credible: a design that is hidden in the creation of the human being “in his image and likeness” and is sealed in the Son of God becoming man.

Today there is greater longevity of human life. This gives us the opportunity to make the covenant between all stages of life grow. Much longevity, but we must make more of the covenant. And this also helps us to make the covenant with the meaning of life in its entirety grow. The meaning of life is not found only in adulthood, say, from 25 to 60 years. The meaning of life is all of it, from birth to death, and you should be able to interact with everyone, and also to have emotional relationships with everyone, so that your maturity will be richer and stronger. And it also offers us this meaning of life, which is a whole. May the Spirit grant us the intelligence and strength for this reform: a reform is needed. The arrogance of the time on the clock must be converted into the beauty of the rhythms of life. This is the reform we must make in our hearts, in the family and in society. I repeat: what must we reform? That the arrogance of the time on the clock be converted into the beauty of the rhythms of life. The covenant of the generations is indispensable. A society in which the elderly do not speak with the young, the young do not speak with the elderly, adults do not speak with neither the elderly nor young people, is a sterile society, without a future, a society that does not look to the horizon but rather looks at itself. And it becomes lonely. May God help us find the right music

for this harmonious relationship among the various ages: the little ones, the elderly, adults, everyone together: a beautiful symphony of dialogue.



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3. Old Age, A Resource for Lighthearted Youth

Wednesday, 16 March 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The Bible narrative — with the symbolic language of the time in which it was written — tells us something shocking. God was so embittered by the widespread wickedness of humans, which had become a normal lifestyle, that he thought he had made a mistake in creating them and decided to eliminate them. A radical solution. It might even have a paradoxical twist of mercy. No more humans, no more history, no more judgment, no more condemnation. And many predestined victims of corruption, violence, injustice would be spared forever.

Does it not happen to us too sometimes — overwhelmed by the sense of powerlessness against evil or demoralized by the “prophets of doom” — that we think it would be better if we had not been born? Should we give credit to some recent theories, which denounce the human species as an evolutionary detriment to life on our planet? All negative?

Indeed, we are under pressure, exposed to opposing demands that confuse us. On the one hand, we have the optimism of an eternal youth, kindled by the extraordinary progress of technology, that depicts a future filled with machines that are more efficient and more intelligent than us, that will cure our ills and devise for us the best solutions to avoid dying: the world of robots. On the other hand, our imagination appears increasingly concentrated on the representation of a final catastrophe that will extinguish us. What happens with an eventual nuclear war. The “day after” this — if there will still be days and human beings — we will have to start again from scratch. Destroying everything to start again from scratch. I do not want to trivialize the idea of progress, naturally. But it seems that the symbol of the flood is gaining ground in our subconscious. After all, the current pandemic puts a heavy weight on our carefree representation of what matters, in life and its destiny.



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In the Bible story, when it comes to saving life on earth from corruption and from the flood, God entrusts the task to the fidelity of the eldest of all, the “righteous” Noah. Will old age save the world, I wonder? In what sense? And how will old age save the world? And what is the prospect? Life after death or just survival until the flood?

A word of Jesus, that evokes “the days of Noah”, helps us to explore more deeply the meaning of the bible passage we have heard. Speaking about the end times, Jesus says, “As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of man. They ate, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all” (Lk 17:26-27). Indeed, eating and drinking, taking a wife or husband, are very normal things and do not seem to be examples of corruption. Where is the corruption? Where is the corruption there? In reality, Jesus stresses the fact that when human beings limit themselves to enjoying life, they lose even the perception of corruption, which mortifies dignity and poisons meaning. When the perception of corruption is lost, and corruption becomes something normal: everything has its price, everything! Opinions, acts of justice, are bought and sold. This is common in the world of business, in the world of many professions. And even corruption is experienced in a carefree way, as if it were part of the normality of human well-being. When you go to do something, and it is slow, that process of doing things is a bit slow, how often do you hear: “Yes, but if you give me a tip, I will speed it up”. Very often. “Give me something and I will take it further”. We are well aware of this, all of us. The world of corruption seems to be part of human being’s normality, and this is bad. This morning I spoke with a man who told me about this problem in his homeland. The goods of life are consumed and enjoyed without concern for the spiritual quality of life, without care for the habitat of the common home. Everything is exploited, without concern for the mortification and dejection that many suffer, and not even for the evil that poisons the community. As long as normal life can be filled with “well-being”, we do not want to think about what makes it empty of justice and love. “But I am fine! Why should I think about problems, about wars, about human suffering, all that poverty, all that evil? No, I am fine. I don’t care about others”. This is the subconscious thought that leads us towards living in a state of corruption.

Can corruption become normal, I wonder? Brothers and sisters, unfortunately, yes. We can breathe the air of corruption just as we breathe oxygen. “But it is normal; if you want me to do this faster, what will you give me?” It is normal! It is normal, but it is a bad thing, it is not good! What paves the way for this?

One thing: the carefreeness that turns only to self-care: this is the gateway to the corruption that sinks the lives of all of us. Corruption benefits greatly from this no good carefreeness. When everything is going well for someone, and others do not matter to him or her: this thoughtlessness weakens our defences, it dulls our consciences and it turns us — even involuntarily — into accomplices. Because corruption is not solitary: a person always has accomplices. And corruption always spreads, it spreads.

Old age is in a good position to grasp the deception of this normalization of a life that is obsessed with enjoyment and empty of an inner reality: life without thought, without sacrifice, without beauty, without truth, without justice, without love: this is all corruption. The special sensibility of us old people, of old age, for the attention, thoughts and affections that make us human, should once again become the vocation of many. And it will be a choice of the elderly's love for the new generations. We will be the ones to sound the alarm, the alert: "Be aware, this is corruption, it will bring you nothing". There is a great need today for the wisdom of the elderly to counteract corruption. The new generations expect from us, the elderly, a word that is prophecy, that opens the doors to new perspectives outside that carefree world of corruption, of the habit of corrupt things. God's blessing chooses old age, for this charism that is so human and humanizing. What is the meaning of my old age? Each one of us elderly people can ask ourselves this. The meaning is this: being a prophet of corruption and saying to others: "Stop, I have taken this path and it does not lead you anywhere! Now I will tell you about my experience". We, the elderly, should be prophets against corruption, just as Noah was the prophet against the corruption of his time, because he was the only one in whom God trusted. I ask you all — and I also ask myself: is my heart open to being a prophet against today's corruption? It is a bad thing, when the elderly do not mature, and become old people with the same corrupt habits of the young. Let us think of the bible story of the judges of Susanna: they are the example of a corrupt old age. And we, with this type of old age, would not be capable of being prophets for the young generations.

And Noah is the example of this generative old age: it is not corrupt, it is generative. Noah does not preach, he does not complain, he does not recriminate, but rather he takes care of the future of the generation that is in danger. We seniors must take care of the young, of children who are in danger. He builds the ark of acceptance and lets people and animals enter it. In his care for life, in all its forms, Noah obeys God's command, repeating the tender and generous gesture of creation, which in reality, is the very thought that inspires the command of God: a

new blessing, a new creation (cf. Gen 8:15-9, 17). Noah's vocation remains ever relevant. The holy patriarch must once again intercede for us. And we, women and men of a certain age — not to say old, as some will be offended — let us not forget that we have the possibility of wisdom, of saying to others: “Look, this path of corruption leads nowhere”. We must be like the good wine that, once aged, can give a good message, not a bad one.

I appeal today to all the people who are of a certain age, not to say old. Be careful: you have the responsibility to denounce the human corruption in which we live and in which this way of living of relativism proceeds, completely relative, as if everything were legitimate. Let us move forward. The world needs strong young people, who move forward, and wise elders. Let us ask the Lord for the grace of wisdom.



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4. Fairwell and inheritance: memory and testimony

Wednesday, 23 March 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good day!

In the Bible, the account of the death of the elderly Moses is preceded by his spiritual testament, called the “Canticle of Moses”. This Song is first and foremost a beautiful confession of faith, and it goes like this: “For I will proclaim the name of the Lord / Ascribe greatness to our God! / The Rock, his work is perfect; / for all his ways are justice. / A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, / just and right is he” (Deut 32:3-4). But it is also the memory of the history lived with God, of the adventures of the people formed from faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And thus, Moses also remembers the bitterness and disappointments of God himself: His faithfulness continually put to the test by the infidelities of His people. The faithful God and the response of the unfaithful people: as if the people wanted to put God’s fidelity to the test. And He remains always faithful, close to His people. This, precisely, is the core of the Song of Moses: God’s fidelity, which accompanies us throughout our whole life.

When Moses pronounces this confession of faith, he is on the threshold of the promised land, and also of his departure from life. He was one hundred and twenty years old, the account notes, “but his eye was not dim” (Deut 34:7). That capacity to see, to really see, also to see symbolically, as the elderly do, who are able to see things, [to see] the most radical significance of things. The vitality of his gaze is a precious gift: it enables him to hand down the legacy of his long experience of life and faith, with the necessary clarity. Moses sees history and passes on history; the elderly see history and pass on history.

An old age that is granted this clarity is a precious gift for the generation that is to follow. Listening personally and directly to the story of lived faith, with all its highs and lows, is irreplaceable. Reading about it in books, watching it in films,



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consulting it on the internet, however useful it may be, will never be the same thing. This “handing down” — which is true and proper *tradition*, the concrete transmission from the old to the young! — this handing down is sorely lacking today for the new generations, an absence that continues to grow. Why? Because this new civilization has the idea that the old are waste material, the old should be discarded. This is brutal! No, it mustn't be like that. There is a tone and style of communication to direct, person-to-person storytelling, that no other medium can replace. An older person, one who has lived a long time, and receives the gift of a lucid and passionate testimony of his or her history, is an irreplaceable blessing. Are we capable of recognising and honouring this gift of the elderly? Does the transmission of faith — and of the meaning of life — follow this path of listening to the elderly, today? I can give a personal testimony. I learned hatred and anger for war from my grandfather, who fought at the Piave in 1914, and he passed on to me this rage for war. Because he told me about the suffering of a war. And this isn't learned in books or in other ways... it's learned in this way, being passed down from grandparents to grandchildren. And this is irreplaceable. The transmission of life experience from grandparents to grandchildren. Today, unfortunately, this is not the case, and we think that grandparents are discarded material: No! They are the living memory of a people, and young people and children ought to listen to their grandparents.

In our culture, which is so “politically correct”, this path seems to be hindered in many ways: in the family, in society, in the Christian community itself. Some even propose abolishing the teaching of history, as superfluous information about worlds that are no longer relevant, which takes resources away from knowledge of the present. As if we were born yesterday!

The transmission of faith, on the other hand, often lacks the passion of a “lived history”. To hand on the faith is not just to say things, “bla, bla, bla”. No! It is to speak about the experience of faith. And so, how can it draw people to choose love forever, fidelity to the given word, perseverance in dedication, compassion for wounded and disheartened faces? Of course, the stories of life must be transformed into testimony, and the testimony must be faithful. An ideology that bends history to its own schemes is certainly not faithful; propaganda that adapts history to promote its own group is not faithful; it is not faithful to turn history into a tribunal in which the past is condemned and any future is discouraged. To be faithful is to tell history as it is; and only those who have lived it can tell it well. This is why it is very important to listen to the elderly, to listen to grandparents. It is important that children converse with them.

The Gospels themselves tell the blessed story of Jesus honestly, without hiding the mistakes, misunderstandings, and even betrayals of the disciples. This is history, it is the truth, this is witness. This is the gift of memory that the “elders” of the Church pass on, right from the beginning, passing it on “from hand to hand” to the generation that follows. It will do us good to ask ourselves: How much do we value this way of transmitting the faith, the passing on of the baton from the elders of the community to young people who are opening up to the future? And here something comes to mind that I have said many times, but that I want to repeat: How is the faith handed on? “Ah, here’s a book, study it”. No. Faith can’t be handed on like that. Faith is passed on in dialect, that is, in familiar speech, between grandparents and grandchildren, between parents and their children. The faith is always handed on in dialect, in that familiar dialect and experience learned through the years. This is the reason dialogue in a family is so important, the dialogue of children with their grandparents, who are the ones who have the wisdom of the faith.

Sometimes I reflect on this strange anomaly. Today, the catechism of Christian initiation generously draws on the Word of God and conveys accurate information on dogmas, the morals of the faith, and the sacraments. What is often lacking, however, is a knowledge of the Church that comes from listening to and witnessing the real history of the faith and the life of the Church community, from the beginning to the present day. As children we learn the Word of God in catechism classes; but the Church is learned, as young people, in the classrooms and in the global information media.

The narration of the history of faith should be like the Canticle of Moses, like the testimony of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. In other words, a story capable of recalling God’s blessings with emotion and our failings with sincerity. It would be a good thing if the courses in catechesis were to include, from the very beginning, the habit of listening to the lived experience of the elderly, to the candid confession of the blessings received from God, which we must cherish, and to the faithful testimony of our own failures of fidelity, which we must repair and correct. The elderly enter the promised land, which God desires for every generation, when they offer to the young the beautiful initiation of their witness and pass on the story of the faith, the faith, in dialect, that familiar dialect, that dialect of the old to the young. Then, guided by the Lord Jesus, the old and the young together enter into his Kingdom of life and love. But all together. Everyone in the family, with this great treasure that is the faith passed on in dialect. Thank you.



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5. Fidelity to God's Visitation for the Next Generation

Wednesday, 30 March 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our series of catecheses on the theme of old age, today we will look at the tender picture painted by the evangelist Saint Luke, who depicts two elderly figures, Simeon and Anna. Their reason for living, before taking leave of this world, is to await God's visit. They were waiting for God to visit them, that is, Jesus. Simeon knows, by a premonition of the Holy Spirit, that he will not die before seeing the Messiah. Anna goes and offers her service to the temple every day. Both of them recognize the presence of the Lord in the child Jesus, who fills with consolation their long wait and reassures them as they bid farewell to life. This is a scene of encounter with Jesus, and of farewell.

What can we learn from these two elderly figures filled with spiritual vitality?

First, we learn that the fidelity of waiting sharpens the senses. Besides, as we know, the Holy Spirit does precisely this: enlightens the senses. In the ancient hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, with which we continue to this day to invoke the Holy Spirit, we say: "Accende lumen sensibus", (Guide our minds with your blest light), enlighten our senses. The Spirit is capable of doing this: of sharpening the senses of the soul, despite the limitations and the wounds of the senses of the body. In one way or another, old age weakens the sensitivity of the body: one is more blind, another is more deaf. However, an old age spent in awaiting God's visit will not miss his passage. On the contrary, it will be even more ready to grasp it, having greater sensitivity to welcome the Lord when he passes. Remember that it is typical of the Christian to be attentive to the visits of the Lord, because the Lord passes through our life, with inspirations, with invitations to better ourselves. And Saint Augustine used to say: "I'm afraid of when God passes" — "But why are you afraid?" — Yes, "I fear that he will pass me by unnoticed". It is the Holy Spirit who prepares the



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senses to understand when the Lord is visiting us, just as he did with Simeon and Anna.

Today we need this more than ever: we need an old age that is gifted with lively spiritual senses, capable of recognizing the signs of God, or rather, the Sign of God, who is Jesus. A sign that challenges us, always: Jesus challenges us because he is “a sign that is spoken against” (Lk 2:34) — but that fills us with joy. Because crisis does not necessarily bring sadness, no: being in crisis, rendering service to the Lord, very often gives you peace and joy. The anaesthesia of the spiritual senses — and this is bad — the anaesthesia of the spiritual senses, in the excitement and daze of those of the body, is a widespread syndrome in a society that cultivates the illusion of eternal youth, and its most dangerous feature is the fact that it is mostly unconscious. One does not realize one is anaesthetized. And this happens. It has always happened and it happens in our time. Numbed senses, without understanding what is happening: when they are numb, the inner senses, the senses of the Spirit that enable us to understand the presence of God or the presence of evil, cannot distinguish between them.

When you lose sensitivity of touch or of taste, you realize it immediately. Instead, that of the soul, sensitivity of the soul, you can ignore that for a long time, living without realizing that you have lost the sensitivity of the soul. It is not simply a matter of thinking of God or religion. The insensitivity of the spiritual senses relates to compassion and pity, shame and remorse, fidelity and devotion, tenderness and honour, responsibility for oneself and for others. It is interesting: insensitivity prevents you from understanding compassion, it stops you from understanding pity, it stops you from feeling shame or remorse for having done something bad... It is like that. Numbed spiritual senses are confusing, and one no longer feels those things, spiritually. And old age becomes, so to speak, the first casualty, the first victim of this loss of sensitivity. In a society that exercises sensitivity primarily for enjoyment, there cannot but be a lack of attention to the frail, and the competition of the winners prevails. And this is how sensitivity is lost. Certainly, the rhetoric of inclusion is the ritual formula of every politically correct discourse. But it still does not bring about a real correction of the practices of normal co-existence: a culture of social tenderness struggles to grow. No, the spirit of human fraternity — which I felt it was necessary to relaunch forcefully — is like a discarded garment, to be admired, yes, but ... in a museum. One loses human sensitivity, one loses these movements of the Spirit that make us human.

It is true that in real life we can observe, with moving gratitude, many young people capable of honouring this fraternity to its fullest. But the problem is

precisely here: there is a gap, a shameful gap, between the testimony of this lifeblood of social tenderness and the conformism that compels youth to present itself in an entirely different way. What can we do to bridge this gap?

From the story of Simeon and Anna, but also from other biblical accounts that tell of old age's sensitivity to the spirit, comes a hidden indication that deserves to be brought to the forefront. In real terms, in what does the revelation that kindles the sensitivity of Simeon and Anna consist? It consists in recognizing the sure sign of God's visitation in a child, whom they did not beget and whom they see for the first time. They accept not to be protagonists, but only witnesses. And when one accepts not being a protagonist, but gets involved as a witness, things go well: that man or that woman is maturing well. But if one always wants to be a protagonist, one will never mature this journey towards the fullness of old age. God's visitation is not embodied in their lives, [the lives] of those who want to be protagonists and never witnesses; it does not bring them onto the scene as saviours: God does not take flesh in their generation, but in the generation to come. They lose the spirit, they lose the desire to live with maturity, and as one usually says, they live in a superficial way. It is the great generation of the superficial, who do not allow themselves to feel things with the sensitivity of the Spirit. But why do they not allow themselves? Partly out of laziness, and partly because they are already unable: they have lost it. It is bad when a civilization loses the sensitivity to the Spirit. On the contrary, it is wonderful when we find elderly people like Simeon and Anna who safeguard this sensitivity to the Spirit, and who are capable of understanding different situations, just as these two understood the situation in front of them, which was the manifestation of the Messiah. There is no resentment and no recrimination for this, when they are in this state of stillness. Instead, great emotion and great comfort when the spiritual senses are still alive. The emotion and comfort of being able to see and announce that the history of their generation is not lost or wasted, precisely thanks to an event that takes on flesh and is manifested in the generation that follows. And this is what elderly people feel when their grandchildren come to speak with them: they feel revived. "Ah, my life is still here". It is so important to go see the elderly; it is so important to listen to them. It is so important to speak with them, because there is this exchange of civilization, this exchange of maturity between the young and the elderly. And in this way, our civilization advances in a mature way.

Only spiritual old age can give this humble and dazzling witness, making it authoritative and exemplary for all. Old age that has cultivated the sensitivity of the soul extinguishes all envy between generations, all resentment, all recrimination

for an advent of God in the generation to come, which arrives together with the departure of one's own. And this is what happens to an elderly person who is open to a young person who is open: he or she bids farewell to life while, so to speak, "handing over" life to the new generation. And this is the farewell of Simeon and Anna: "Now I can go in peace". The spiritual sensitivity of old age is capable of breaking down competition and conflict between generations in a credible and definitive way. This sensitivity goes beyond: with this sensitivity the elderly go beyond conflict, they go beyond, they go towards unity, not conflict. This is certainly impossible for men, but possible for God. And nowadays we are in great need of this, of the sensibility of the spirit, the maturity of the spirit; we need wise, elders, mature in spirit, who give hope for life!



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6. "Honour your father and your mother": love for the gift of life

Wednesday, 20 April 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today, with the help of the Word of God that we have heard, we open a passage through the fragility of old age, marked in a special way by the experiences of confusion and despondency, of loss and abandonment, of disillusionment and doubt. Of course, the experiences of our frailty in the face of life's dramatic — sometimes tragic — situations, can occur at any stage of life. However, in old age they can produce less of an impression and induce in others a kind of habituation, even annoyance. How many times have we heard or thought: 'Old people are a nuisance' — 'But, these old people are always a nuisance'; we've said it, we've thought it... The more serious wounds of childhood and youth rightly provoke a sense of injustice and rebellion, a strength to react and fight. On the other hand, the wounds, even serious ones, of old age are inevitably accompanied by the feeling that, in any case, life is not contradicting itself, because it has already been lived. And so the elderly are somewhat removed from our experience: we want to keep them at a distance.

In the common human experience, love — as is said — descends: it does not return to the life behind with the same force with which it pours out on the life that is still before us. The gratuitousness of love also appears in this: parents have always known this, the old soon learn it. Nevertheless, revelation opens a way for reciprocating love in a different way: that of honouring those who have gone before us, the way of honouring the people who came before us begins here: honouring the elderly.

This special love that paves the way in the form of honour — that is, tenderness and respect at the same time — intended for the elderly is sealed by God's commandment. "Honour thy father and mother" is a solemn commitment,



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the first of the “second tablet” of the Ten Commandments. It is not just about one’s own father and mother. It is about their generation and the generations before, whose leave-taking can also be slow and prolonged, creating a time and space of long-lasting coexistence with the other ages of life. In other words, it is about the old age of life.

Honour is a good word to frame this aspect of returning love that concerns old age. That is, we have received the love of parents, of grandparents, and now we return this love to them, to the elderly, to our grandparents. Today we have rediscovered the term ‘dignity’, to indicate the value of respecting and caring for the life of everyone. Dignity, here, is essentially equivalent to honour: honouring father and mother, honouring the elderly is recognizing the dignity they possess.

Let us think carefully about this beautiful expression of love which is honour. Even care for the sick, the support of those who are not self-sufficient, the guarantee of sustenance, can be lacking honour. Honour is lacking when an excess of confidence, instead of being expressed as delicacy and affection, tenderness and respect, is transformed into roughness and abuse. This occurs when weakness is reproached, and even punished, as if it were a fault, and when bewilderment and confusion become an opening for derision and aggression. It can happen even in the home, in nursing homes, as well as in offices or in the open spaces of the city. Encouraging in young people, even indirectly, an attitude of condescension — and even contempt — for the elderly, for their weaknesses and their precariousness, produces horrible things. It opens the way to unimaginable excesses. The young people who set fire to a “bum”’s blanket — we’ve seen this — because they see him as a human reject, are the tip of the iceberg, that is, of the contempt for a life that, far from the attractions and impulses of youth, already seems to be a life to be cast aside. Often we think that the old are the refuse, or we put them in the trash; to despise the elderly and cast them from life, to put them aside.

This contempt, which dishonours the elderly, actually dishonours all of us. If I dishonour the elderly, I dishonour myself. The passage from the Book of Sirach, which we heard at the beginning, is rightly harsh on this dishonour, which cries out for vengeance in the sight of God. There is a passage in the story of Noah that is very expressive in this regard. The elderly Noah, the hero of the flood and still a hard worker, lies unconscious after having had a few too many drinks. He’s already old, but he’s had too much to drink. His sons, in order not to wake him up and embarrass him, gently cover him, looking aside, with great respect. This text is very beautiful and says everything about the honour due to an old man. To cover the weakness of the elderly, so they don’t feel ashamed. This is a text that helps us a lot.

In spite of all the material provisions that richer and more organised societies make available for old age — of which we can certainly be proud — the struggle for the restoration of that special form of love which is honour still seems fragile and immature. We must do all we can to support and encourage it, offering better social and cultural support to those who are sensitive to this decisive form of the ‘civilization of love’.

And on this point, allow me to offer some advice to parents: please, bring your kids, children, young children, closer to the elderly, always bring them closer. And when the elderly person is ill, a bit out of their mind, always bring them closer: let them know that this is our flesh, that this is what has made it possible for us to be here. Please don’t push the elderly away. And if there is no other option than to send them to a nursing home, please visit them and bring the children to see them: they are the honour of our civilization, the old people who opened the doors. And many times, the children forget this.

I’ll tell you something personal: I used to love visiting nursing homes in Buenos Aires. I went often, I visited each one... And I remember once I asked a lady: ‘And how many children do you have?’ — ‘I have four, all married, with grandchildren...’, and she started talking to me about the family. ‘And do they come [to visit]?’ — ‘Yes, [she said,] ‘they always come!’ When I left the room, the nurse, who had heard, said to me: ‘Father, she told a lie to cover up for her children. Nobody has come for six months!’ This is discarding the old, it is thinking that the old are refuse. Please: it is a grave sin. This is the first great commandment, and the only one that says the reward: ‘Honour your father and your mother, and you will have long life on earth.’ This commandment to honour the elderly gives us a blessing, which is expressed in this way: ‘You will have long life.’ Please cherish the elderly. And [even] if their mind goes, cherish the old. Because they are the presence of history, the presence of my family, and thanks to them I am here, we can all say: thanks to you, grandfather and grandmother, I am alive. Please don’t leave them alone. And this, looking after the elderly, is not a question of cosmetics and plastic surgery, no. Rather, it is a question of honour, which must transform how we educate the young about life and its stages. Love for the human person that is common to us, including honouring a life lived, is not a matter for the old. Rather it is an ambition that will bring radiance to the youth who inherit its best qualities. May the wisdom of God’s Spirit grant us to open the horizon of this true cultural revolution with the necessary energy. Thank you.



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7. Naomi, the alliance between the generations that opens up the future

Wednesday, 27 April 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

Today we will continue to reflect on the elderly, on grandparents, on old age – the word seems ugly but no, the elderly are great, they are beautiful! And today we will let ourselves be inspired by the splendid book of Ruth, a jewel of the Bible. The parable of Ruth sheds light on the beauty of family bonds: generated by the relationship of a couple, but which go beyond it. Bonds of love capable of being equally strong, in which the perfection of that polyhedron of fundamental affections that make up the family grammar of love shines. This grammar brings vital lymph and generative wisdom to the set of relationships that build up the community. With regard to the Canticle of Canticles, the Book of Ruth is like the other panel in the diptych of nuptial love. Just as important, just as essential, it indeed celebrates the power and the poetry that must inhabit the bonds of generation, kinship, devotion and fidelity that involve the entire family constellation. And which even become capable, in the dramatic conjunctures in the life of a couple, of bringing an unimaginable power of love, able to relaunch hope and the future.

We know that clichés about the bonds of kinship created by marriage, especially that of the mother-in-law, the relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law, speak against this perspective. But, precisely for this reason, the word of God becomes precious. The inspiration of faith can open up a horizon of witness that counters the most common prejudices, a horizon that is precious for the entire human community. I invite you to rediscover the book of Ruth! Especially in the meditation on love and in catechesis on the family.

This short book also contains valuable teaching on the alliance of the generations: where youth reveals itself to be capable of restoring enthusiasm to



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mature age – this is essential: when youth restores enthusiasm to the elderly – and where old age discovers it is capable of reopening the future to wounded youth. At the beginning, the elderly Naomi, although moved by the affection of her daughters-in-law, widowed by her two sons, is pessimistic with regard to their destiny within a population that is not their own. She therefore affectionately encourages the young women to return to their families to rebuild their lives – these widows were young. She says, “I can do nothing for you”. This already appears to be an act of love: the elderly woman, without a husband and without her sons, insists that her daughters-in-law abandon her. However, it is also a sort of resignation: there is no possible future for the foreign widows, without the protection of a husband. Ruth knows this, and resists this generous offer – she does not want to go home. The bond established between mother- and daughter-in-law was blessed by God: Naomi cannot ask to be abandoned. At first, Naomi appears more resigned than happy about this offer: perhaps she thinks that this strange bond will aggravate the risk for both of them. In some cases, the tendency of the elderly towards pessimism needs to be countered by the affectionate pressure of the young.

Indeed, Naomi, moved by Ruth’s devotion, will emerge from her pessimism and even take the initiative, opening up a new future for Ruth. She instructs and encourages Ruth, her son’s widow, to win a new husband in Israel. Boaz, the candidate, shows his nobility, defending Ruth from the men in his employ. Unfortunately, this is a risk that still exists today.

Ruth’s new marriage is celebrated and the worlds are again pacified. The women of Israel tell Naomi that Ruth, the foreigner, is worth “more than seven sons” and that the marriage will be a “blessing of the Lord”. Naomi, who was full of bitterness and even said that her name was bitterness, in her old age, will know the joy of having a part in the generation of a new birth. Look how many “miracles” accompany the conversion of this elderly woman! She converts to the commitment of making herself available, with love, for the future of a generation wounded by loss and at risk of abandonment. The points of reconstruction are those that, on the basis of the probability drawn by commonplace prejudices, ought to generate insuperable fractures. Instead, faith and love enable them to be overcome: the mother-in-law overcomes her jealousy for her own son, loving Ruth’s new bond; the women of Israel overcome their distrust of the foreigner (and if women will do it, everyone will); the vulnerability of the lone girl, faced with male power, is reconciled with a bond full of love and respect.

And all this because the young Ruth is obstinate in her fidelity to a bond exposed to ethnic and religious prejudice. And I return to what I said at the beginning – today the mother-in-law is a mythical figure: I won't say that we think of the mother-in-law as the devil but she is always thought of as an unpleasant figure. But the mother-in-law is the mother of your husband, she is the mother of your wife. Let us think today about this rather widespread feeling that the farther away the mother-in-law is, the better. No! She is a mother, she is elderly. One of the most beautiful things about grandmothers is seeing the grandchildren – when their children have children of their own, they come alive again. Look closely at the relationship you have with your mothers-in-law: at times they are a bit special, but they have been the mother to your spouse, they have given you everything. We should at least make them happy, so that they go forth into their old age with joy. And if they have some fault, we should help them to correct it. And to you, mothers-in-law, I say: be careful with your tongue, because its misuse is one of the worst sins of mothers-in-law. Be careful.

And Ruth, in this book, accepts her mother-in-law and makes her come alive again, and the elderly Naomi takes the initiative of reopening the future for Ruth, instead of limiting herself to enjoying her support. If the young open themselves to gratitude for what they have received, and the elderly take the initiative of relaunching their future, nothing can stop the flourishing of God's blessings among peoples! Do not forget, may young people speak with their grandparents, may the young speak with the old, may the old speak with the young. This bridge must be rebuilt in a strong way – there is a current of salvation, of happiness there. May the Lord help us, doing this, to grow in harmony with families, that constructive harmony that goes from the oldest to the youngest, that beautiful bridge that we must protect and safeguard.



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8. Eleazar, consistency of the faith, honourable inheritance

Wednesday, 4 May 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

On the path of these catecheses on old age, today we meet a biblical figure — an old man — named Eleazar, who lived at the time of the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes. He is a wonderful character. His character gives us a testimony of the special relationship that exists between *the fidelity of old age and the honour of faith*. He is a proud one! I would like to speak precisely about the honour of faith, not only about faith's consistency, proclamation, and resistance. The honour of faith periodically comes under pressure, even violent pressure, from the culture of the rulers, who seek to debase it by treating it as an archaeological find, or an old superstition, an anachronistic fetish, and so on.

The biblical story — we have heard a short passage of it, but it is good to read it all — tells of the episode of the Jews being forced by a king's decree to eat meat sacrificed to idols. When it is the turn of Eleazar, an elderly man in his 90s who was highly respected by everyone — a person of authority — the king's officials advise him to fake it, that is, to pretend to eat the meat without actually doing so. Religious hypocrisy. There is so much religious hypocrisy, clerical hypocrisy. These people tell him, "Be a bit of a hypocrite, no one will notice". In this way, Eleazar would be saved, and — they said — in the name of friendship, he would accept their gesture of compassion and affection. After all, they insisted, it was a small gesture, pretending to eat but not eating, an insignificant gesture.

It is a small thing, but Eleazar's calm and firm response is based on an argument that strikes us. The central point is this: dishonouring the faith in old age, in order to gain a handful of days, cannot be compared with the legacy it must leave to the young, for entire generations to come. But well-done Eleazar! An old man who has lived in the coherence of his faith for a whole lifetime, and who now adapts



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himself to feigning repudiation of it, condemns the new generation to thinking that the whole faith has been a sham, an outer covering that can be abandoned, thinking that it can be preserved interiorly. And it is not so, says Eleazar. Such behaviour does not honour faith, not even before God. And the effect of this external trivialization will be devastating for the inner life of young people. The consistency of this man who considers the young, considers his future legacy, thinks of his people.

It is precisely old age — and this is beautiful for old people — that appears here as the decisive place, the irreplaceable place for this testimony. An elderly person who, because of his vulnerability, accepts that the practice of the faith is irrelevant, would make young people believe that faith has no real relationship with life. From the outset, it would appear to them as a set of behaviours which, if necessary, can be faked or concealed, because none of them is particularly important for life.

The ancient heterodox “gnosis,” which was a very powerful and very seductive trap for early Christianity, theorised precisely about this, this is an old thing: that faith is a spirituality, not a practice; a strength of the mind, not a form of life. Faithfulness and the honour of faith, according to this heresy, have nothing to do with the behaviours of life, the institutions of the community, the symbols of the body. The seduction of this perspective is strong, because it interprets, in its own way, an indisputable truth: that faith can never be reduced to a set of dietary rules or social practices. Faith is something else. The trouble is that Gnostic radicalisation of this truth nullifies the realism of the Christian faith, because the Christian faith is realistic. Christian faith is not just saying the Creed: it is thinking the Creed, it is understanding the Creed, it is doing the Creed. Working with our hands. Instead, this gnostic proposal is to pretend. The important thing is that you have spirituality, and then you can do whatever you please. And this is not Christian. It is the first heresy of the gnostics, which is very fashionable at the moment, in so many centres of spirituality and so on. It makes void the witness of this people, which shows the concrete signs of God in the life of the community and resists the perversions of the mind through the gestures of the body.

The gnostic temptation, which is one of the — let us use the word — heresies, one of the religious deviations of this time; the gnostic temptation remains ever present. In many trends in our society and culture, the practice of faith suffers from a negative portrayal, sometimes in the form of cultural irony, sometimes with covert marginalization. The practice of faith for these gnostics, who were already around at the time of Jesus, is regarded as a useless and even harmful externality, as an antiquated residue, as a disguised superstition. In short,

something for old people. The pressure that this indiscriminate criticism exerts on the younger generations is strong. Of course, we know that the practice of faith can become a soulless external practice — this is the other danger, the opposite — but in itself it is not at all so. Perhaps this very important mission is precisely up to us, older people: *to give faith back its honour*, to make it coherent, which is the witness of Eleazar: consistency to the very end. The practice of faith is not the symbol of our weakness, no, but rather the sign of its strength. We are no longer youngsters. We were not kidding around when we set out on the Lord's path!

Faith deserves respect and honour to the very end: it has changed our lives, it has purified our minds, it has taught us the worship of God and love of our neighbour. It is a blessing for all! But the faith as a whole, not just a part of it. We will not barter our faith for a handful of quiet days, but will do as Eleazar, consistent to the very end, to martyrdom. We will show, in all humility and firmness, precisely in our old age, that believing is not something “for the old”, but a matter of life. Believing in the Holy Spirit, who makes all things new, and he will gladly help us.

Dear elderly brothers and sisters — not to say old, we are in the same group — please look to young people: they are watching us. They are watching us. Do not forget that. I am reminded of that wonderful post-war film: *The Children Are Watching Us*. We can say the same thing about young people: young people are watching us and our consistency can open up a beautiful path of life for them. Potential hypocrisy, on the other hand, will do great harm. Let us pray for one another. May God bless all of us old people.



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9. Judith. Admirable in youth, a generous in old age

Wednesday, 11 May 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we will talk about Judith, a biblical heroine. The conclusion of the book that bears her name — we have listened to a passage from it — summarizes the final part of the life of this woman, who defended Israel from its enemies. Judith is a young and virtuous Jewish widow who, thanks to her faith, beauty and cunning, saved the city of Bethulia and the people of Judah from the siege of Holofernes, general of Nebuchadnezzar king of Assyria, an overbearing and contemptuous enemy of God. And so, with her astute way of acting, she was able to slit the throat of the dictator who came against the country. She was brave, this woman. She had faith.

After the great adventure in which she was the protagonist, Judith returned to live in her town, Bethulia, where she lived her old age beautifully, until she was 105. The time of old age had come for her, as it does for many people: sometimes after an intense life of work, sometimes after an adventurous existence, or one of great dedication. Heroism does not consist only of the great events that fall under the spotlight, such as that of Judith, who killed the dictator. Heroism is often found in the tenacity of love poured out in a difficult family and on behalf of a threatened community.

Judith lived for more than 100 years, a special blessing. But it is not uncommon today to live many years after the season of retirement. How should we interpret this? How should we make the most of this time we have? I will retire today, and will have many years ahead of me, and what can I do, in these years? How can I grow — in age, that goes without saying; but how can I grow in authority, in holiness, in wisdom?



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For many people, the prospect of retirement coincides with that of a deserved and long-awaited rest from demanding and wearisome activities. But it also happens that the end of work can be a source for worry, and is accompanied with some trepidation. “What will I do, now that my life will be emptied of what filled it for so long”? This is the question. Daily work also means a set of relationships, the satisfaction of earning a living, the experience of having a role, well-deserved recognition, a time that is full that goes beyond working hours alone.

Certainly, there is the joyful and tiring task of looking after grandchildren, and grandparents today have a very important role in the family in helping to raise grandchildren; but we know that ever fewer children are born nowadays, and parents are often farther away, more subject to moving around, with unfavourable work and housing conditions. At times they are also more reluctant to leave room to grandparents for education, granting only what is strictly linked to the need for assistance. But someone said to me, with an ironic smile, “Nowadays, in this socio-economic situation, grandparents have become more important because they have a pension”. There are new demands, also within the area of educational and family relations, that require us to reshape the traditional alliance between the generations.

But, let us ask ourselves: are we making this effort to “reshape”? Or do we simply suffer the inertia of material and economic conditions? The co-presence of generations is, in fact, lengthening. Are we all trying together to make these conditions more human, more loving, more just, in the new conditions of modern societies? For grandparents, an important part of their vocation is to support their sons and daughters in the upbringing of their children. The little ones learn the power of tenderness and respect for frailty: irreplaceable lessons that, are easier to impart and receive with grandparents. For their part, grandparents learn that tenderness and frailty are not solely signs of decline: for young people, they are conditions that humanize the future.

Judith was soon widowed and had no children, but, as an old woman, she was able to live *a season of fullness and serenity*, in the knowledge that she had lived to the fullest the mission the Lord had entrusted to her. It was time for her to leave the good legacy of wisdom, tenderness, and gifts for her family and her community: *a legacy of goodness and not only of goods*. When we think of a legacy, at times we think of *goods*, and not of the *goodness* that is done in old age, and that has been sown, that *goodness* that is the best legacy we can leave.

It was precisely in her old age that Judith “granted freedom to her favourite handmaid”. This is a sign of an attentive and humane approach to those who had

been close to her. This maid had accompanied her at the moment of that adventure, to win over the dictator and to cut his throat. When we are old, we lose some of our sight, but our inner gaze becomes more penetrating — one sees with the heart. We become capable of seeing things that had previously escaped us. The elderly know how to look, and they know how to see... It is true: the Lord does not entrust his talents only to the young and the strong. He has talents for everyone, made to fit each person, the elderly too. The life of our communities must know how to benefit from the talents and charisms of so many elderly people who are already retired, but who are a wealth to be treasured. On the part of the elderly themselves, this requires a creative attention, a new attention, a generous availability. The previous skills of active life lose their constraint and become resources to be given away: teaching, advising, building, caring, listening ... preferably in favour of the most disadvantaged who cannot afford any learning or who are abandoned in their loneliness.

Judith freed her maid and showered everyone with attention. As a young woman, she had won the esteem of the community with her courage. As an old woman, she garnered esteem because of the tenderness with which she enriched their freedom and affections. Judith is not a pensioner who lives her emptiness in melancholy. She is a passionate elderly woman who fills the time God gives her with gifts. Remember: one of these days, take the Bible and look at the Book of Judith: it is very short, it is easy to read. It is ten pages long, no more. Read this story of a courageous woman who ends up this way, with tenderness, generosity, a worthy woman. And this is how I would like all our grandmothers to be. All like this: courageous, wise, and who bequeath to us not money, but the legacy of wisdom, sown in their grandchildren.



10. Job. The trial of faith, the blessing of waiting

Wednesday, 18 May 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The biblical passage we have just heard concludes the Book of Job, a universal literary classic. On our catechetical itinerary on old age, we meet Job. We encounter him as a witness of a faith that does not accept a “caricature” of God, but protests loudly in the face of evil until God responds and reveals his face. And in the end, God responds, as always, in a surprising way: He shows Job His glory without crushing him, or better still, with sovereign tenderness, tenderly, just like God always does. The pages of this book need to be read well, without prejudices, without stereotypes, to understand the power of Job’s cry. It would be good for us to learn from him how to overcome the temptation of moralism when faced with exasperation and bitterness over the pain of having lost everything.

In this concluding passage of the book — we remember the story — Job loses everything in his life, he loses his wealth, he loses his family, he loses his son and he even loses his health, and he remains there: plagued, in dialogue with three friends, then a fourth one, who come to greet him. This is the story, and in today’s passage, the concluding passage of the book, when God finally takes the floor (and this dialogue between Job and his friends is like the path leading to the moment in which God speaks his Word), Job is praised because he understood the mystery of God’s tenderness hidden behind his silence. God rebukes Job’s friends who presumed to know everything, to know about God and about suffering, and, having come to comfort Job, they had ended up judging him with their preconceived paradigms. God preserve us from this hypocritical and presumptuous piety! God preserve us from this moralistic religiosity and the religiosity of precepts that gives us a certain presumption and leads to Pharisaism and hypocrisy.

This is how the Lord expresses himself in their regard. Thus says the Lord: “My wrath is kindled against you [...] for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has”. This is what the Lord says to Job’s friends. “My servant Job

shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (42:7-8). God’s declaration surprises us because we have read pages on fire with Job’s protest which have left us dismayed. And yet, the Lord says Job spoke well, even when he was angry, and even when angry at God, but he spoke well because he refused to accept that God was a “Persecutor”. God is something else. And as a reward, God gives back to Job double of all his possessions, after asking him to pray for those bad friends of his.

The turning point in the conversion of faith comes right at the height of Job’s venting, when he says, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (19:25-27). This passage is really beautiful. It makes me think of the end of that brilliant oratorio of Handel, Messiah. After the celebratory Hallelujah, the soprano slowly sings this passage: “I know that my Redeemer lives”, peacefully. And so, after this painful and joyful experience of Job, the voice of the Lord is something else. “I know that my Redeemer lives” — it is truly a beautiful thing. We could interpret it like this: “My God, I know You are not a Persecutor. My God will come and do me justice”. It is the simple faith in the Resurrection of God, the simple faith in Jesus Christ, the simple faith that the Lord is always waiting for us and will come.

The parable of the Book of Job dramatically represents in an exemplary way what truly happens in life — that is — that trials that are too heavy fall on a person, on a family, on a people, trials that are disproportionate in relation to human lowliness and frailty. It often happens in life that “when it rains it pours”, as the saying goes. And some people are overcome by an accumulation of evil that truly seems excessive and unjust. It is like this for many people.

We have all known people like this. We have been struck by their cry, but we have also often admired the firmness of their faith and love in their silence. I am thinking of parents of children with serious disabilities, those who live with a permanent illness, those who assist a member of their family.... These situations are often aggravated by the scarcity of economic resources. At certain junctures in history, the accumulation of burdens gives the impression that they were given a group appointment. This is what happened in these years with the Covid-19 pandemic, and what is happening now with the war in Ukraine.

Can we justify these “excesses” as the higher intelligence of nature and history? Can we religiously bless them as justified responses to the sins of victims,

as if they deserve it? No, we cannot. There is a kind of right that victims have to protest vis-à-vis the mystery of evil, a right that God grants to everyone, that indeed, he himself inspires, after all. Sometimes I meet people who approach me and say: “But, Father, I protested against God because I have this and that problem....” But, you know, friend, that protesting is a way to pray when it is done like that. When children, when young people object against their parents, it is a way of attracting their attention and of asking that they take care of them. If you have some wound in your heart, some pain, and you want to object, object even to God. God will listen to you. God is a Father. God is not afraid of our prayer of protest, no! God understands. But be free, be free in your prayer. Do not imprison your prayer within preconceived paradigms! Prayer should be like this: spontaneous, like that of a child with his father, who says everything that comes out of his mouth because he knows his father understands him. In the first moment of the drama, God’s “silence” signifies this. God does not shy away from the confrontation, but, from the beginning, allows Job to give vent to his protest, and God listens. At times, perhaps we need to learn this respect and tenderness from God. And God does not like that encyclopedia — let’s call it this — of explanations, of reflections that Job’s friends make. These are things that come off the tip of their tongues which are not right: it is that type of religiosity that explains everything, but the heart remains cold. God does not like this. He likes Job’s protest and silence more.

Job’s profession of faith — which emerges precisely from his incessant appeal to God, to a supreme justice — concludes in the end with what I would say is an almost mystical experience that makes him say, “I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee” (42:5). How many people, how many of us after an experience that is a bit ugly, a bit dark, take a step and know God better than before! And like Job, we can say: “I knew you because I had heard about you, but now I have seen you because I have encountered you”. This testimony is particularly believable if it is picked up in old age, in its progressive frailty and loss. The elderly have experienced so much in life! And they have also seen the inconsistency of human promises; lawyers, scientists, even men of religion, who confuse the persecutor with the victim, accusing them of being fully responsible for their own suffering. They are mistaken!

The elderly who find the path of this testimony, who turn their resentment for their loss into a tenacity for awaiting God’s promises — there is a change, from resentment for the loss, toward the tenacity of following God’s promises — these elderly people are an irreplaceable garrison for the community in facing the excesses of evil. The believer whose gaze is turned toward the Crucifix learns just

that. May we learn this as well, from the many grandfathers and grandmothers, from the many elderly people, who like Mary, join their sometimes heartbreaking prayers to that of the Son of God who abandons himself to the Father on the cross. Let us look at old people, let us look at elderly men and women, the elderly.

Let us look at them with love. Let us see their personal experiences. They have suffered so much in life. They have learned so much in life. They have gone through so much, but in the end they have this peace, a peace, I would say, that is almost mystical, that is, the peace of the encounter with God, to the point that they can say, "I knew you because I had heard about you, but now I have seen you with my own eyes". These elderly people resemble the peace of the Son of God on the cross who abandons himself to the Father.



World Day
for Grandparents
and the Elderly
2022

11. Ecclesiastes: the uncertain night of meaning and of things in life

Wednesday, 25 May 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our reflection on old age – we are continuing to reflect on old age – today we are dealing with the Book of Qoheleth, or Ecclesiastes, another jewel set in the Bible. On a first reading, this short book is striking and leaves one bewildered by its famous refrain: “Everything is vanity”, everything is vanity: the refrain that goes on and on, everything is vanity, everything is “fog”, everything is “smoke”, everything is “emptiness”. It is surprising to find in Holy Scripture these expressions that question the meaning of existence in. In reality, Qoheleth’s continuous vacillation between sense and non-sense is the *ironic representation of an awareness of life that is detached from the passion for justice*, of which God’s judgement is the guarantor. And the Book’s conclusion points the way out of the trial: “Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man” (12:13). This is the advice to resolve this problem.

Faced with a reality that at certain times seems to us to accommodate every opposite, attributing the same destiny to all of them – which is to end up in nothingness – the path of indifference may also appear to us as the only remedy to a painful disillusionment. Questions like these arise in us: Have our efforts changed the world? Is anyone capable of validating the difference between the just and the unjust? It seems that all this is useless... Why make so much effort?

There is a kind of negative intuition that can manifest itself in any season of life, but there is no doubt that old age makes this encounter with disenchantment almost inevitable. Disenchantment comes in old age. And so *the resistance of old age to the demoralising effects of this disenchantment* is decisive: if the elderly, who have seen it all by that time, keep intact their *passion for justice*, then *there is hope for love*, and also for *faith*. And for the contemporary world, the passage through



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this crisis, a healthy crisis, has become crucial. Why? Because a culture that presumes to measure everything and manipulate everything also ends up producing a collective demoralisation of meaning, a demoralization of love, a demoralization of goodness.

This demoralisation takes away our will to act. A supposed “truth” that limits itself to observe the world, also notes its indifference to opposites and consigns them, without redemption, to the flow of time and the fate of nothingness. In this form – cloaked in the trappings of science, but also very insensitive and very amoral – the modern quest for truth has been tempted to take leave of its passion for justice altogether. It no longer believes in its destiny, its promise, its redemption.

For our modern culture, which would like, in practice, to consign everything to the exact knowledge of things, the appearance of this new cynical reason – that combines knowledge and irresponsibility – is a harsh repercussion. Indeed, the knowledge that exempts us from morality seems at first to be a source of freedom, of energy, but soon turns into a paralysis of the soul.

With its irony, Qoheleth has already unmasked this deadly temptation of an omnipotence of knowledge – a “delirium of omniscience” – that generates an impotence of the will. The monks of the most ancient Christian tradition had precisely identified this illness of the soul, which suddenly discovers the vanity of knowledge without faith and without morality, the illusion of truth without justice. They called it “*acedia*”. And this is a temptation for everyone, even the elderly... But it is [a temptation] for everyone. It is not simply laziness; no, it’s more than that. It is not simply depression. No. Rather, *acedia* it is the surrender to knowledge of the world devoid of any passion for justice and consequent action.

The emptiness of meaning and lack of strength opened up by this knowledge, which rejects any ethical responsibility and any affection for the real good, is not harmless. It not only takes away the strength for the desire for the good: by counterreaction, it *opens the door to the aggressiveness of the forces of evil*. These are the forces of reason gone mad, made cynical by an excess of ideology. In fact, with all our progress, with all our prosperity, we have really become a “society of weariness”. Think about it: we are the society of weariness. We were supposed to have produced widespread well-being and we tolerate a market that is scientifically selective with regard to health. We were supposed to have put an insuperable threshold for peace, and we see more and more ruthless wars against defenceless people. Science advances, of course, and that is good. But the wisdom of life is something else entirely, and it seems to be stalled.

Finally, this an-affective and ir-responsible reason also takes away meaning and energy from the knowledge of truth. It is no coincidence that ours is the age of *fake news*, collective superstitions, and pseudo-scientific truths. It's curious: in this culture of knowledge, of knowing everything, even of the precision of knowledge, a lot of witchcraft has spread, but cultured witchcraft. It is witchcraft with a certain culture but that leads you to a life of superstition: on the one hand, to go forward with intelligence in knowing things down to the roots; on the other hand, the soul that needs something else and takes the path of superstitions, and ends up in witchcraft. From the wry wisdom of Qoheleth, old age can learn the art of bringing to light the deception hidden in the delirium of a truth of the mind devoid of affection for justice. *Elderly people rich in wisdom and humour* do so much good for the young! They save them from the temptation of a knowledge of the world that is dreary and devoid of the wisdom of life. And these elderly people also bring the young back to Jesus' promise: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Mt 5:6). They will be the ones to sow the hunger and thirst for justice in the young. Take courage, all of us older people! Take courage and go forward! We have a very great mission in the world. But, please, we must not seek refuge in this somewhat non-concrete, unreal, rootless idealism – let us speak clearly – in the witchcraft of life.



12. "Forsake me not when my strength is spent" (Ps 71:9)

Wednesday, 1st June 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The beautiful prayer of the elderly man that we find in Psalm 71, which we have listened to, encourages us to meditate on the strong tension that dwells in the condition of old age, when the memory of labours overcome and blessings received is put to the test of faith and hope.

The test already presents itself with the weakness that accompanies the passage through the fragility and vulnerability of advanced age. And the Psalmist – an elderly man who addresses the Lord – explicitly mentions the fact that this process becomes an opportunity for abandonment, deception, and for prevarication and arrogance, which at times prey upon the elderly. It is true! In this throwaway society, this throwaway culture, elderly people are cast aside and suffer these things. A form of cowardice in which we specialize in this society of ours. Indeed, there is no lack of those who take advantage of the elderly, to cheat them and to intimidate them in myriad ways. Often, we read in the newspapers or hear news of elderly people who are unscrupulously tricked out of their savings, or are left without protection or abandoned without care; or offended by forms of contempt and intimidated into renouncing their rights. Such cruelty also occurs within families – and this is serious, but it happens in families too. The elderly who are rejected, abandoned in rest homes, without their children coming to visit them, or they go a few times a year. The elderly person is placed in the corner of existence. And this happens: it happens today, it happens in families, it happens all the time. We must reflect on this.

The whole of society must hasten to take care of its elderly – they are its treasure! – s who are increasingly numerous and often also the most abandoned.

When we hear of elderly people who are dispossessed of their autonomy, of their security, even their home, we understand that the *ambivalence of today's society* with regard to old age is not a problem of occasional emergencies, but a feature of that throwaway culture that poisons the world we live in. The elder of the Psalm confides his discouragement to God: "My enemies speak concerning me", he says. "Those who watch for my life consult together / and say, 'God has forsaken him; / pursue and seize him / for there is none to deliver him'" (vv. 10-11).

The consequences are fatal. Old age not only loses its dignity, but it even doubts that it deserves to continue. In this way, we are all tempted to hide our vulnerability, to hide our illness, our age and our seniority, because we fear that they are the precursor to our loss of dignity. Let us ask ourselves: is it human to induce this feeling? How is it that modern civilization, so advanced and efficient, is so uncomfortable with sickness and old age? How is it that it hides illness, it hides old age? And how is it that politics, which is so committed to defining the limits of a dignified survival, is at the same time insensitive to the dignity of a loving coexistence with the old and the sick?

The elder of the Psalm we have heard, this elderly man who sees his old age as a defeat, rediscovers *trust in the Lord*. He feels the need to be helped. And he turns to God. Saint Augustine, commenting on this Psalm, exhorts the elderly: "Fear not, that you be cast away in that weakness, in that old age. ... Why do you fear lest He should forsake you, lest He cast you away for the time of old age, when your strength shall have failed? Yea at that time in you will be the strength of Him, when your strength shall have failed" (*Expositions on the Psalms* 36, 881-882), this is what Augustine says. And the elderly Psalmist invokes: "Deliver me and rescue me, /incline thy ear to me, and save me. / Be thou to me a rock of refuge, / a strong fortress, to save me, / for thou art my rock and my fortress" (vv. 2-3). The invocation testifies to God's faithfulness and summons his ability to rouse consciences that have been diverted by insensibility to the span of mortal life, which must be protected in its entirety. He again prays thus: "O God, be not far from me; / O my God, make haste to help me! / May my accusers be put to shame and consumed; / with scorn and disgrace may they be covered / who seek my hurt" (vv. 12-13).

Indeed, shame should fall on those who take advantage of the weakness of illness and old age. Prayer renews in the heart of the elder the promise of God's faithfulness and His blessing. *The elderly man rediscovers prayer and bears witness to its strength*. Jesus, in the Gospels, never rejects the prayer of those who are in need of help. The elderly, by virtue of their weakness, can teach those who are living in other ages of life that we all need to abandon ourselves to the Lord, to invoke his

help. In this sense, we must all learn from old age: yes, there is a gift in being elderly, understood as abandoning oneself to the care of others, starting with God himself.

There is then a “*magisterium of frailty*”, do not hide frailties, no. It is true, there is a reality and there is a magisterium of frailty, which old age is able to remind us of in a credible way for the whole span of human life. Do not hide old age, do not hide the fragility of old age. This is a teaching for all of us. This teaching opens up a decisive horizon for the reform of our own civilization. A reform that is now indispensable for the benefit of the coexistence of all. The marginalization of the elderly – both conceptual and practical – corrupts all seasons of life, not just that of old age. Every one of us can think today of the elderly people in the family: how do I relate to them, do I remember them, do I go to visit them? Do I try to make sure they lack nothing? Do I respect them? The elderly who are in my family: think of your mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, aunts and uncles, friends ... Have I cancelled them from my life? Or do I go to them to obtain wisdom, the wisdom of life? Remember that you too will become elderly. Old age comes for everyone. And treat the elderly today as you would wish to be treated in your old age. They are the memory of the family, the memory of humanity, the memory of the country. Protect the elderly, who are wisdom. May the Lord grant the elderly who are part of the Church the generosity of this invocation and of this provocation. May this trust in the Lord spread to us. And this, for the good of all, for them.

Subsequent catecheses will be available at
<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/audiences/2022/index.html#audiences>

and on the website of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life
<http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/laityfamilylife/en/eventi/2022/ii-giornata-mondiale-dei-nonni-e-degli-anziani.html>