

International Congress for the pastoral care of the elderly  
organized by the *Dicastery for the Laity, Family, and Life*

*“The richness of many years of life”*

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## CONCLUSIONS

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*Under Secretary*

In these past few days, we have heard and learned a great deal about the condition of the world’s elderly, and this places before us an immense challenge of a cultural, pastoral, and spiritual nature.

There are geographical areas where some seeds of pastoral ministry are fertilizing arid land, as well as places where instead, there are extreme needs that cannot yet find answers—immense places where the great silent presence of the numerous elderly is becoming a voiceless cry. There is little pastoral care for the elderly in the world, but that which we have heard of here can begin to spread, as though by contagion. It is the desire and will of the Church to listen to the cry of those who cannot make themselves heard because they are too fragile, isolated, alone, without family, ill, or facing discrimination and exclusion simply because they are elderly.

For this reason, at the conclusion of these two days, in the name of our Dicastery I exhort you all to continue these, our common reflections, in your own dioceses and from within the pastoral realities from which you come. This conference ends, but it begins *a process of evangelization*, which is for the local Churches to implement. Together we have laid the foundations, now we must continue the work.

Thank you all for your interest, for your courage in being here, for your faithful response to Pope Francis’ appeal to concern ourselves with the elderly.

Even in the broader international sphere, next year’s Agenda<sup>1</sup> already includes the urgency of decisive protections for elderly persons, with a view towards inclusion, protecting them from the culture of “ageism”—which sees the passing of years as a devaluing—and from every form of discrimination. Correcting the negative and

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<sup>1</sup> *UN Program on ageing*, established by the General Assembly in 2010 with the resolution 65/182 for the strengthening of the protection of the human rights of elderly persons.

demeaning representation of old age, which dominates many societies today, must be a cultural and educational commitment that involves all generations.

Life is a gift, always, and as long as we continue to devalue old age we will not know how to value even nascent life or the life of children, the sick, and anyone whose outward way of being differs from the fictitious ideal of hedonistic and narcissistic perfection, of which post-modernity and the commercial marketplace are imbued. It is time to act, so that those who are advancing in years can age with dignity, without fear of being reduced to one who no longer counts for anything. For this, we must modify the practical culture of some ecclesial contexts, to adopt an attitude of greater listening, care, and discernment of the needs of those who must go more slowly because of their flagging strength, but who can still be a living and active part of society.

We are the Church, and as such we must feel called to intervene and creatively “invent” the pastoral care of the elderly. We need a pastoral ministry which is attentive to the diversity of needs and which aims towards making the most of the capacities and possibilities of each one. This requires two interior attitudes: a strong will towards a conversion of heart in grasping the profound worth of the elderly, and an attitude of “giving” across generations.

There is a very beautiful law in the Ten Commandments, beautiful because it corresponds to the truth, capably of prompting a profound reflection on the meaning of our life: “honor your father and mother.” “Honor” in Hebrew signifies a weight of importance, or value. Honoring means recognizing the value of a presence: that of those who begot us to life and to the faith. And these are not only our parents, but also our grandparents and those who have come before us in generations past. “It is the commandment that contains an upshot,” Pope Francis explains to us,<sup>2</sup> because honoring those who came before us can lengthen our days and make us happy.” (Dt 5:16)

The realization of a full life and of a more just society for future generations depends on recognizing of the presence of grandparents and the elderly, and of the richness they represent for us, in every context and in every geographical place throughout the world. And this recognition has “respect” as its corollary, which is the case if it is expressed through welcoming, assistance, and valuing the qualities of the elderly. Old age manifests itself as a “favorable time,” where everything converges, because we can grasp the meaning of life and reach a “wisdom of heart.”<sup>3</sup> But it is necessary to create the right conditions so that all of us as elderly are able to mature in

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Catechism on the Commandments* (19.9.2018).

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, *Letter to the elderly*, 1 October 1999.

this wisdom—that is, “the quiet force with which we order the events of our lives, so that the past is preserved and the future is carried forward”—the sort of resolution which makes life substantial, serious, and precious.<sup>4</sup>

It is the profound beauty of this teaching which must be transmitted to new generations, with a new and inter-generational pastoral ministry which, starting from the catechism, knows how to put children into dialogue with the elderly in their neighborhood, in their parish, on the streets, and in their homes. We must create the concrete conditions so that there may be truly an exchange of gifts between generations. This helps us prepare our sons and daughters for a substantial life, made up of service and dialogue, so that one day they will know how to accept the passing of years and the fading of strength, so as to have a beautiful old age themselves.

In concrete terms, considering the wide variety of the personal situations of the elderly in the hundreds of dioceses spread throughout the world, as well as the different cultural and social contexts, we can conclude together, while keeping in mind some points to put on the agenda for when you return home, and which we hope you can implement according to the needs of your dioceses:

1. Consider the large population of the elderly as part of the people of God, and not only as the object of charitable activity. They are a considerable portion of the Catholic laity and have particular needs which we must take into account. For this, it is necessary that dioceses create offices dedicated to the pastoral care of the elderly.
2. A pastoral ministry that “goes out” to people. The pastoral care of the elderly, like all pastoral ministry, is inserted into the new season of missionary activity inaugurated by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*. This means announcing the presence of Christ to the elderly. Evangelization must aim towards the spiritual growth of all ages, because the call to holiness is for everyone, even for grandparents. Not all elderly people have encountered Christ already. And even if this encounter has taken place, it is essential to help them to rediscover the significance of their baptism<sup>5</sup> in this special phase of life, in a threefold direction: a. To find a sense of wonder and awe before the mystery of the love of God and of eternity; b. To overcome the widespread misconception of a judging God who punished, and to discover instead a relationship with the God of merciful love; c. To ask the elderly who are part of our communities to be agents of the New Evangelization, so that they themselves may transmit the

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<sup>4</sup> Romano Guardini, *Le età della vita*, Vita e Pensiero, 2015, p. 55 (*Die Lebensalter. Ihre ethische und pädagogische Bedeutung*, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pontificium Consilium Pro Laicis, *The Dignity of Older People and their Mission in the Church and in the World*, Vatican City 1998

Gospel. They are called to be missionaries. Where? Among the elderly, the sick, the poor, with children, in families, and as spouses, with the witness of their life.

3. Do not establish pastoral ministry to the elderly as an isolated sector, but rather do so according to a more integrated pastoral approach. It is necessary that in every area of our ecclesial commitment, we keep the elderly in mind: in youth ministry, in ministry to families, and in the pastoral care of the laity. In this sense, the Dicastery will be mindful of the elderly as part of the World Meeting of Families and World Youth Day.

4. Value and make the most of the gifts and charisms of the elderly in charitable activity, in the apostolate, in the liturgy—for example, by involving them more in the permanent diaconate, and in the ministries of Lector and Acolyte. But also in liturgical services, in secretarial work for the parish, and as extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist.

5. Support families and be present to them when they need to look after elderly grandparents. There is a need to promote the elderly staying in their own homes with integrated forms of domestic assistance, and it is also necessary to form workers and volunteers in accord with these needs. And support family associations: families cannot do this alone. It is necessary to encourage networks among families, so that they feel able to share their efforts and responsibilities with other families.

For the elderly, rootedness in their own families is an essential factor in their well-being. In international studies, this is second only to physical health. There is need to protect them, with determination and courage, from every form of abuse and violence—whether psychological, physical, or moral; within families just as in institutions—by making references to the various instances, civil but also ecclesiastical, where such abuses can be denounced without fear.

In the same way, we must promote within families an attitude of esteem towards grandparents, who can have an essential educational role in the transmission of the faith, in the memory of our roots, and in the witness of prayer. In our hyper-connected world, which changes at a sometimes dehumanizing technological speed, the elderly are often excluded. There are some elderly who learn to use the internet and its digital tools, but there are also many who no longer have the cognitive capacity to do this and thus remain excluded. They do not have access to the virtual dimension which cages their children and grandchildren, and so become silent observers in a world that tends to cancel and sweep away roots, memories, traditions, and human and Christian values.

Their role is indispensable in reminding us where we come from, because “man is a narrative being,” who needs to “put on stories to preserve his life.”<sup>6</sup>

6. Resist the “throw away” culture. Let us consider how many elderly ask to be put into institutions so as not to be a burden. In the future, this sense of one’s own uselessness could have even more troubling outcomes. And in many countries euthanasia—explicitly condemned by the Church—is already being proposed for the elderly who are alone and tired of living. Therefore, wherever people are questioning whether their life is still useful or if anyone cares about them, well, this is a void that the pastoral ministry of the Church must fill; there are the needs of those who cry out, who seek a helping hand. Let us seek out these voids, holding out our hands with courage and love—just as God our Father does with each of us, when we manifest our weakness and ask him for help.

7. Care for the spirituality of the elderly, so that their religious life, alongside piety and devotional practices, will be immersed in an authentic deep spiritual relationship with God. The aging man is not arriving at the end; rather, he needs to approach God and the mystery of eternity with: 1. the apostolate of prayer, which all of the elderly, even the most ill, can carry out. Every sick elderly person, with prayer, can embrace the world and change it with his strength! In fact, even when weak, every person can become an instrument of salvation history. 2. With the help of the sacraments: Reconciliation, the Eucharist, and the Anointing of the Sick—it is best to explain this incredible gift of the Holy Spirit, which too many people in the world mistake for a sacrament announcing an impending death, when instead it provides the strength to confront, with serenity and trust, any difficulty of soul or body. 3. With spiritual dialogue: with the passing of years, people continue to experience the succession of different phases in the spiritual life,<sup>7</sup> and it is necessary that we attend to their questions, and to their need for intimacy with Christ and for the sharing of their faith, a need which exists also at a more advanced age in life.

These are a few of the guidelines that we can give you. It is not possible for the concrete solutions to come from our Dicastery, but you all will develop and mature them in meeting with your own elderly. No strategies are needed, but rather those human relationships from which can spring networks of collaboration and solidarity between dioceses, parishes, lay communities, associations, and families. Solid networks with strong roots are necessary, not fragmented and fragile initiatives. Yet

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of Social Communication 2020.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Letter to the elderly*, 1 October 1999.

sometimes it is the smallest of seeds—like the mustard seed—from which the greatest projects are born.

We will accompany and support you all. Let us remember, as Romano Guardini has said, that old age is a time of wisdom, which is often the fruit of experience: “that which is created when the absolute and the eternal enter into consciousness, and this casts light on life.” In the flagging of their strength, the elderly, although often less active, are radiant—radiant with their wisdom which makes the meaning of things manifest. And in order to remain, humanity will always have need of this wisdom.