

Round Table: We must invent old age (La vecchiaia dobbiamo inventarcela)

**Peter Kevern, *Treasures both new and old.*
*Inventing old age in the Catholic tradition***

When was the last time somebody said to you, “It’s beautiful to be old”? These words of Pope Benedict should be a challenge and a provocation to us: “*It’s beautiful to be old. ... The quality of a society, I’d say of a civilization, is judged by how well it treats its elderly.*”¹

They are a challenge because, if we are honest, we must admit that we do not often recognize the beauty of being old. Perhaps for that reason, we see old age as a problem and a threat to our society.

Instead of something beautiful, in contemporary western societies, the rising number of older people is seen as a ‘grey tsunami’ that threatens to overwhelm our comfortable lives. In this image, older people have no individuality, no dignity; it presents older people as nothing but a problem. They are portrayed as needy and demanding, as an ugly mass that takes from society but does not give.

When we look at this image, we get an insight into how frightened our society is of old people; how frightened we may be of becoming old ourselves; and how we may become inhuman towards older people as a result. We are diminished by our fear of old age, our hearts are shrunken by it. Our fear leaves us, in the words of the Holy Father, “infected by the virus of death”:² life itself has become a curse, a problem for us.

This is one reason why it’s so important to find a new vision of what it is to be old. We have been given a great gift in older people, but our hearts and our imaginations are not big enough to embrace it with joy and hope. Or, as Pope

1

Benedict XVI, Visit To The Community Of Sant'egidio's Home For The Elderly, "Viva Gli Anziani", November 12, 2012, at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121112_viva-anziani.html

² Francis, [General Audience](#),

March 4, 2015.

Francis said at an audience in 2015, “Thanks to the progress of medicine life-spans have increased: but society *has not “expanded” to life!*”³ To rise to this challenge and to bring life and hope to our society, we must begin by reaching deep into the wisdom of our tradition. We must ourselves expand into life, and bring new life to others through the vision we have to offer them.

So as Christians, as Catholics and as theologians what vision of old age do we have to offer to a needy and fearful world? We must ask old people themselves, because they are the experts. This is why Pope Francis said to *them*, specifically, “This period of life is different from those before, there is no doubt; we even have to somewhat ‘invent it ourselves’, because our societies are not ready, spiritually and morally, to appreciate the true value of this stage of life.”⁴ So I don’t feel qualified to provide a vision of old age; but what I can do here is to offer three insights from the riches of our faith which, in different ways, the Holy Father has recently brought to our attention. My hope and prayer is that they will contribute to our work to offer the world a bigger vision, a life-expanding vision that will bring hope and encouragement rather than fear.

1. The first insight is *the vision of eternal life*. You will all be familiar with images of ‘the seven ages of man’, which shows the progression of a person through life. This understanding of life is deeply embedded in our culture, but it is a dangerous image in the present day. It suggests that our best time is our middle years: in old age there is only decline, loss and finally death. Our destiny is therefore to become ugly and worthless until we die. So it is not surprising that many people are now calling for ‘assisted suicide’ for older people who are tired of life and feel that their old age has become a burden to their families.⁵ This is a fundamentally pagan view of life that brings only despair.

But we do not believe in this account. We believe that old age is only one stage on the passage from birth to eternal union with God: There is no point

³ Francis, [General Audience](#), March 4, 2015.

⁴ Francis, [General Audience](#), March 11, 2015.

See <https://www.thehastingscenter.org/should-feeling-tired-of-life-be-grounds-for-euthanasia/>

in this life at which the Christian pilgrimage ceases. Christ continues to call us to discipleship, to seek our own sanctity and the transformation of our societies for as long as we are able to respond. In the words of Pope Francis: “The Lord tells us that our history is still open: *it is open until the end; it is open with a mission*. And he indicates our mission with these three imperatives: ‘Rise! Look! Hope!’”⁶

We reject the account of old age as a decline into meaninglessness because we know there is more to a human soul than their life upon this earth. As we age, we may become physically and mentally frail, but we do not cease to have a mission. So when we invent old age, we must start with the question, “What is the mission of this person? What is God calling them to do and to be?”

2. The second theme is that “*The elder is not an alien*”.⁷ “While we are young,” says Pope Francis, “we are led to ignore old age, as if it were a disease to keep away from”.⁸ We distance ourselves from the poor, the frail and the elderly because we are afraid of weakness and vulnerability. We live in a society which values people only for being strong, for being independent, for being examples of physical and mental perfection. So when we are young we may create a fantasy in which we are strong, capable and independent; we are completely different from those frail and elderly people we see around us.

But it is clear in Catholic teaching, and pre-eminently in the incarnation, that frailty and dependence fill our earliest days and shadow us throughout our lives: our existence is only possible with the grace of God and the help of other people, every day. Elderly people show us the truth about our own humanity. As we get older, so we may get more frail: but that makes us *more* human, not *less* human. The older person is not an alien. She is not an alien because we are all frail, all in need, all struggling with weakness and vulnerability.

⁶ Francis, [Homily](#), August 27, 2017.

⁷ Francis, General Audience, March 4, 2015.

⁸ Ibid..

This is one of the core messages of the Mass: we gather as broken and wounded people in the presence of the One who was broken and killed on the Cross, and who now fills us with his Spirit of healing and hope. The Eucharistic Body of Christ is only fully realized when we acknowledge our own weakness and frailty and see in all others the light of the glory of God. It was, perhaps, what St Francis of Assisi realized when he obeyed the call to embrace the leper: the truth of his own sickness and need.

Perhaps this is one reason, a spiritual reason, why it is so important that we care for older people. Of course, we care for older people because we are commanded to love; but in addition, it is when we care for older people that we recognize the truth about our own need, the ways in which we also are frail and in need of the help and support of others.

So in order to ‘invent old age’ we must learn to see ourselves clearly and truly: every person, of every age, has those characteristics which we try to banish to the end of life.

3. The third theme I want to explore is what makes a *true dream or vision for the future*. It has been prompted by some words of Pope Francis just last month, in which he says, “The elderly are dreamers - dreams, however, full of memory, not empty, vain, like those of certain advertisements; the dreams of the elderly are imbued with memory, and therefore fundamental for the journey of the young, because they are the roots.”⁹

We live in a society that beguiles us with fantasies for a future where we get everything we want. We all have ‘dreams’ of ourselves as strong, beautiful wise and powerful, visions that arise from our childish needs to be the centre of attention: the Church Fathers have always condemned these as temptations leading us towards sin. By contrast, the Church encourages us towards a form of godly wisdom rooted in our shared memory: in the retelling of the gospel story, in the memory of the witness of the saints, in the *anamnesis* of the Mass. It is by reflection on these things that the wise come to a true vision of the future, a true and rich hope rather

⁹ Francis, [Address](#) to the members of the Italian National Association of Senior Workers, December 16, 2019.

than a false and empty fantasy. Such people are, as Jesus says, "like a householder who brings out from his storeroom new things as well as old."

10

And it follows therefore that the people whose dreams and visions we can trust are those who have imbibed of the Church's store of memories most deeply, have pondered and retold its stories for longest. Like Jacob who dreamed of a ladder reaching to heaven, true dreamers are those who dream in the light of the Eternal God. Our calling in the world is not to be dazzled by the fast-changing social and technological worlds that grab for our attention, but to allow the stories of our faith to work in us and bring us to wisdom and true vision. "And for us", says Pope Francis, "this . . . is called 'dreaming'. We are grandfathers called to dream and to give our dream to today's young people: they need it. Because they will draw from our dreams the power to prophecy and carry out their task."¹¹

This leads back to the theme of 'We have to invent it for ourselves'. Only older people have the maturity, the wisdom to generate 'true dreams' of the future in which they are active agents and leaders of the people of God. When I reflect upon these themes, it seems to me that we do older people a disservice when we expect them to wait passively to be cared for by us. They still have a life of their own to lead, as spiritual leaders and authorities.

So older people do indeed need to 'invent it for *themselves*', because the future is still open for them and God continues to call them to service. But more than this, we need older people to invent old age *for the rest of us* too, because our societies are going astray. As the last three popes have all said in their different ways, we have forgotten how to value older people because we have forgotten how to value anything that doesn't appear productive, or attractive, or interesting to look at. In our 'throwaway society' nothing has value for what it was in the past, or what it may be in the future: function is everything. In addition, we want to thrust from us anything that reminds us that we also are frail, we also will grow old. And we have no time for the wise dreams of mature Christians who have spent their lives being moulded by our tradition.

¹⁰ Mathew 13:52.

¹¹ Francis, [General Audience](#), March 11, 2015.

Our societies need to be reminded that a human being is someone who is called by God for the whole of their life; who finds their home in the Church community of wounded penitents; and whose dreams are the fruit of a lifetime of memory. Older people fulfil this ministry among us, whether or not we have eyes to see and ears to hear them. So when we care for the needs of older people, we are not only engaging in one of the ‘corporeal works of mercy’, as they are traditionally called. Nor are we simply engaging in an act of worship, by caring for those needy ones who are closest to our Lord’s heart. We are also taking part in a revolutionary, prophetic act: finding riches and meaning among people our society sometimes writes off as meaningless; finding a Truth about God and human beings that cuts through the illusions and denials of our age.

We should not be looking to merely comfort older people, but we should be seeking to support them in their charism as leaders and visionaries, even in (or maybe because of) their frailty. We should also be continuing to look to them for leadership: for new wisdom as well as old. Older people can guide us back to deep truths about our humanity and our relationship to God.

So, is it “Beautiful to be Old”? It is, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Let’s take this to heart, and make it our message.