

Catherine Wiley, *The Elderly, a Challenge and Opportunity for the Family*

Good Morning Everybody. We would like to thank His Eminence, Kevin Cardinal Farrell, Fr. Alexandre Awi, Prof. Gabriella Gambino and Vittorio Sclezo, and everyone at the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life who have made it possible for us to be here with you on this very special day.

Pope Francis said that “being old is no time to rest, but a chance for a new mission in the world.”

I feel truly privileged to be here with you today, at the beginning of this new mission, sharing ideas and speaking on a topic I feel I know something about - Family challenges and opportunities, and also, as founder of the Catholic Grandparents Association.

My husband, Stewart, a convert to the Catholic faith, and I, have been married for over fifty years. We have four children and ten grandchildren who, despite being brought up carefully in the Catholic faith, yet sadly have drifted away from the faith.

We have divorce, and addiction, in our family. Some of my grandchildren have not been baptized, so, like many of you here today, we are no strangers to the difficulties, heartaches, and challenges of modern-day Catholic family life.

I am here, speaking to you as an elderly Irish Grandmother, but I feel I have to tell you that I don't feel elderly, I don't act elderly, and I certainly don't look elderly, God forbid! In fact, at 73, I would say that I am blessed to be in the prime of my life.

Many grandparents that I know, of my age, are multi-tasking, playing an indispensable role in helping their children to bring up their grandchildren, while sometimes also looking after, or caring for, their own aging parents, which we all know can be both gratifying, and very stressful.

Many are still holding down a job, and many older people are contributing to the community, and to our parishes, keeping our Church doors open. In fact, many of our older people are running our parishes these days.

Look at Pope Francis and the Queen, one is 83, and one is 93, and they're still doing fantastic work. One is still running the Church in his 80's and the other is still sorting out family crisis in her 90's, and showing everyone the meaning of duty. When people are so much more inclined to put their own personal choices first, neither the Pope nor the Queen is sitting back.

Pope Francis said “there is a true vocation, a mission, for older people who have a lot more free time now at their disposal than before.”

Since the beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis, has constantly reminded us of the gifts that grandparents, and the elderly, have to offer and seem to be ignored. We need to listen, and to help him, in any way we can.

We need to help grandparents, to help themselves to recognize their vocation - which is to pass on their faith to future generations, and to keep prayer at the heart of family life. This is the Mission statement of the Catholic Grandparents Association. This is our only purpose, and the reason that we exist.

For those of you who know nothing about our Association – On Our Lady’s birthday, September 8, nearly 20 years ago, I was praying before a statue of Our Lady of Walsingham at the Marian Shrine in Walsingham, England, and as my mind wandered I was considering, what I could possibly give Our Lady for a birthday present? What would truly delight her? A cake, a new dress – what could you give our Holy Mother who had given us everything?

Almost immediately, it came to me that, in this tiny village where faithful pilgrims had journeyed for centuries, a pilgrimage to honor her mother and father, Saint Joachim and Saint Anne, the grandparents of her Divine Son, Jesus, would truly delight her, and honor, and thank her, and all of our grandparents, alive and dead, who had done so much for us, particularly in transmitting our beloved faith.

I would just like to say, many of us here today are grandparents, great grandparents, great aunts, great uncles, but each one of us is also a grandchild, and without our own grandparents, we would not be here today. So just take a moment to pray and thank them.

So, with great fear and trepidation, totally out of my comfort zone, guided and led by the Holy Spirit, I suppose you could call it an impulse of faith, we organized the first grandparents’ pilgrimage in the world.

It feels to me now, after years of reflection, that our Holy Mother was calling on grandparents, who have been tried and tested in the faith, to rebuild the Church.

With the blessing of our Patron, Archbishop Neary, in Tuam, Ireland, and endorsed by the Vatican, we have grown into a Private Association of the Faithful, with ministries and members in over 60 countries.

I believe that we were amongst the first, if not the very first, to shine a light on the vocation of grandparents in the Church itself, and their vital, and critical, contribution to the Church, the family, and to society.

It's hardly surprising that the Catholic Grandparents Association has grown so quickly. You, who are grandparents understand instinctively the great human, moral, and spiritual challenges children face today in the world in which they are growing up.

We in the Catholic Grandparents Association strive for opportunities for our children, and grandchildren, to be brought up in a modern and inclusive Catholic faith, whoever and whatever they are, surrounded and supported their whole lives as we have been, through the love of Jesus Christ and our Holy Mother Church.

In recent times the faith has been waning in the younger generation. It's hardly surprising when they have grown up in an era only hearing negativity about our Church. They have completely missed out on the total beauty of the Gospel.

In these circumstances, it is essential that we grandparents make them feel utterly included, and that we recognize the beauty of our faith, which has sustained us through all the ups and downs of our lives.

Society often projects negative images of older people - whereas youth are depicted at the best stage of life, old age is often shown as the worst. In reality, we have much in common – we are dependent on each other in one way or the other, from the cradle to the grave.

Life goes full circle as shown in this little poem, entitled *The Little Boy and the Old Man*, by Shel Silverstein.

*“Said the little boy, sometimes I drop my spoon.
Said the little old man, I do that too.
The little boy whispered, I wet my pants.
I do that too laughed the old man.
Said the little boy, I often cry.
The old man nodded. So do I.
But worst of all, said the boy,
It seems grown-ups don't pay attention to me.
And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand.
I know what you mean, said the little old man.”*

There is no greater blessing in life than to care for those who have cared for you. To be there for them, in person, in every way.

We all age in different ways. Many of us require part time, or even fulltime care, either at home or in independent living, or in a care home. We may need care

physically, medically, emotionally, and spiritually. How are we going to achieve this? Who is going to do it when we are not around?

We need to develop strong Parish structures, to know who they are, and to help meet their needs. They need to know that they are loved, needed, and wanted, for who they are, and not for what they are. We need to be sure they are, that they remain, valued members of the community. It is our sacred responsibility to make provision for all their needs.

Saint Mother Teresa said: “The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved.” Visiting them, and ensuring they receive the Sacraments, is of paramount importance. No medical care will cure their spiritual ills, only our Loving God can heal. Time is critical, we need to do something now to make sure no-one is neglected.

The opportunity presents itself now, in this blessed and timely conference, to share thoughts and ideas, ways and means, that will truly make a difference in our families, our Church and our communities, and highlight how we influence our families, particularly when they get older, and are in need.

The Catholic Grandparents Association has, since our inception, focused on the inherent dignity of grandparents, and the elderly, and their God-given vocation within our families. They have earned our love and invite us to dialogue with them, which drawing from their life experiences, enriches our lives, urges us to seek even greater discourse with them, both physically and spiritually.

This vocation and value of grandparents was simply, but profoundly, expressed in the universal prayer for grandparents composed in 2008 at our request by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.

This powerful, insightful prayer encapsulates a fitting and accurate description of both the attributes, the gifts, and the needs of our elderly and our grandparents, and I think perfectly articulates the essence of this conference, and the mission statement of the Catholic Grandparents Association.

*“Lord Jesus,
You were born of the Virgin Mary,
The daughter of Saints Joachim and Saint Anne.
Look with love on Grandparents
The world over.
Protect them! They are a source of enrichment
For families, for the Church,
And for all of society.*

*Support them! As they grow older,
May they continue to be for their families
Strong pillars of Gospel faith,
Guardians of noble domestic ideals,
Living treasuries of sound religious traditions.
Make them teachers of wisdom and courage,
That they may pass on to future
Generations the fruits of their mature, human and spiritual experience
Lord Jesus,
Help families and society
To value the presence and
Roles of Grandparents.
May they never be ignored or excluded,
But always encounter respect and love.
Help them to live serenely and
To feel welcomed
In all the years of life which you give them.
Mary, Mother of all the living,
Keep Grandparents constantly in your care,
Accompany them on their earthly pilgrimage,
And by your prayers, grant that all families
May one day be reunited in our heavenly homeland,
Where you await all humanity
For the great embrace of life without end.
Amen”*

That really says it all. This prayer has been translated into 25 languages, and into Braille. Please pray it every day. This grace filled prayer needs to hang in every church in the country, so that grandparents are welcomed, recognized, honored, and prayed for, by all generations.

We need to better recognize the valuable resource we have in our elderly, who often feel disenfranchised. As a Church, we need to provide more opportunities for continued spiritual growth, and an enhanced prayer life, recognizing the contributions, wisdom, and experience of our elderly population.

Pope Francis has referred to old age as a “Season of Dialogue” because it presupposes a dialogue, and an encounter, between the elderly and the young, in order to build a society that is more just, more beautiful, more supportive, more Christian.

Open dialogue, and communication, within our families is crucial. The elderly are the keepers of our memories, they are great storytellers. We have the greatest story ever told, so keep on telling it.

A famous rabbi was asked how the Jewish nation kept the faith during the Holocaust. “He replied they never forgot to tell the story.” We need to accompany our young people to places of spiritual significance, churches, shrines, the place of their baptism, to cemeteries - to remember the generations who came before us who have passed on their great gift of faith – their only lasting legacy.

Last year I took two of my teenage grandchildren to visit my young sister who was dying. They kissed her goodbye in her hospital bed, it was very emotional and sad, as they joined the family gathered around her bed, praying the rosary.

I don't think they'd ever encountered such reverence, or heard the rosary prayed. This was their first experience of the death of a loved one. I was very glad that they were with me, to witness the truth and beauty of our faith in death.

Young people don't like to talk about death (as a matter of fact no-one does) but as our Holy Father says “We must reconcile ourselves to death”, we must prepare for it, and ensure that our families are aware of our wishes, and that we are well informed about end of life issues, and our Church's teaching.

The elderly and our young people need places where they can encounter each other.

The Catholic Grandparents Association have, through our ministries worldwide, initiated both practical, spiritual, and social, resources and activities benefiting parish life in our communities.

We have pioneered and introduced grandparents' pilgrimages, thanksgiving masses for grandparents and the elderly, grandparents' days in schools, Children's Prayer Appeals, Adopt a Prayer Child, promulgating Pope Benedict's Prayer for Grandparents, spread to many countries the Roman celebration of Babinelli Sunday, catechetical materials, seminars, retreats, monthly Grandparents Newsletters, monthly ministry meetings with relevant topics - reviving old traditions and creating new, and after many years of reflection and prayer, we have coined the first medal of St. Joachim and St. Anne, with their beloved Grandson, Jesus.

Grandparents, through their years of experiences in the family, have navigated all of life's difficulties. You're there through the sad and the happy times in the family – you offer support and understanding to single parents left to raise children,

when there is the misery of divorce, and the breakup of the family, job loss, you are the anchor, families struggling with addiction, mental illness, miscarriage.

You keep on caring, and helping, even when your family situation may not be what He would've wanted for them. You do not stop loving someone whose marriage has broken down, or if they are in trouble, or happened to be gay, in fact, you love them all, because they need your love more.

It can be very difficult to be a grandparent of integrity in these unbelievably complex situations. This was something that was never discussed in our generation, so, of course, we have little experience on how to respond.

When our children and grandchildren hurt, we hurt double. These are the very opportunities that enable grandparents and the elderly to be Jesus to their families.

When we feel helpless, and hopeless, we turn to God, we turn to prayer. That is what I have always done throughout my life, pray! And God never fails to guide, console, and uplift me.

We pass on our faith by our example, through mercy, forgiveness, and love, just like Jesus taught us. We have to face these challenges with integrity, and faith. Grandparents, this is your time! You are being called. This is your job, and nobody else can do it as well as you.

We have to be Jesus to the family. We have to give them hope. Without the understanding, wisdom, tolerance, compassion, and unconditional love of the elders in our family, we would be lost.

My advice, and my own personal experience as an elderly grandmother, is to always meet them where they are, you will always love them, make sure the door is always open.

Take care of yourselves too, love one another, cherish one another while you still have each other. Tell your spouse you love him, and pray for him.

There is no greater example of the fruits of a long life, full of blessings to a family, than an elderly loving couple who have stayed together through thick and thin, through their love and the love of Jesus Christ. It is lovely to see older people holding hands or exchanging a kiss. Our grandchildren laugh and call it "old love".

Pope Francis has referred to old age as a "Season of Dialogue", because it presupposes a dialogue and an encounter between the elderly and the young, in order to build a society that is more just, more beautiful, more supportive, more Christian. Open dialogue and communication within our families is crucial.

A Ministry for Grandparents and the elderly, in parishes, is absolutely essential. This vital ministry can be a powerful resource within the Parish. A place where grandparents are encouraged to share their gifts and talents, to help build up the kingdom of God in our families, and in our Church. And, above all, to pray together. Grandparents' prayers, and the prayers of the elderly, are very powerful.

Bishop John Hine, of England told a very touching story of when his elderly grandmother was dying. Sitting beside her bed holding her hand, she looked at him and said, "John, do you know that I have prayed for you every day of my life." He was moved to tears. And so was I. Who have you prayed for every day of your life? Let your children, and your grandchildren, know that you are praying for them. Whatever you do, teach them to pray, wherever, and whenever, you can.

My generation, this generation of elderly, not only have the opportunity to change things for the next generation -- we are the opportunity. Our challenge is to work together, never forgetting that we are the lifeblood of the family, and the Church.

We are the past, the present, and the future, and we are up to the challenge, for this new mission.

With Ministries for the elderly and grandparents in the parish, utilizing all the treasures and gifts they have to offer, working together as one, all ages and all stages, we will not fail. Failure is simply not an option in this case. Pope Francis said "Where there is no honor towards the elderly, there is no future for the young".

Finally, and most importantly, we have begged our holy Father Pope Francis to proclaim a world Day of prayer for Grandparents and the Elderly, in the Church.

We can only imagine how this would unify and unite us in prayer and love - grandparents, parents, grandchildren and all generations to come. This would be a lasting legacy acknowledging the richness, blessing, and thanksgiving for a full life.

We thank God for our vocation, our many blessings, and the richness of many years of life.

We thank all of you for listening, and we pray that the fruits of this conference will shed a new light on the living treasures we have right here in our midst. And we pray for the people who cannot be with us today. And may the blessings of Saint Joachim and Saint Anne, parents of Mary, Grandparents of Jesus, be with you and your families today and always. God bless you all.