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Giovani e anziani nel cammino sinodale

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Panel 2.2





THE YOUNG AND THE ELDERLY ON THE SYNODAL JOURNEY

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Thank you for the invitation to speak today about the reasons why we should pair our elders with our young people and about ways that we might do that. I come to you not as a pastoral minister, but as a church historian who spends most of his life in the ancient and medieval worlds and who wondered how past societies treated their elders. Looking for inspiration, I decided to read the Bible through start to finish and note how elders were portrayed across the centuries in different genres from multiple perspectives. This resulted in a book, *Ageless Wisdom: Lifetime Lessons from the Bible*. I'd like to draw on some of that material very briefly today. My goal is that I will provide context and that your own creativity, experience, and cultures will produce pastoral impact—as my family has tried to do with our own daughter, Grace, and her grandparents: my parents Joan and Anthony, and my wife Karen's parents Catherine and Bob in the United States.

Some stark facts to begin: in my own country, every single day, 10,000 people reach the age of 65. In 2008, 7% of the world's population was over 65. In 2040, 20% of the world's population will be over 65—that's one in five people on the planet. Moreover, in 2040, there will be more human beings over the age of 65 than under the age of 5—a statistic that has never before happened in human history. I don't think we're prepared for such a change. What are the implications for health care, housing, food, mental health services, government aid—and pastoral care, which is our focus today? Let's get out in front of the issue with some good advance planning.

Our recent popes have been leading the way. In 1980, John Paul II told the International Forum on Active Aging that older men and women play a role in “the continuity of the generations” by their “charism of bridging the gap.” Benedict XVI, visiting a London nursing home in 2010, said, “As advances in medicine and other factors lead to increased longevity, it is important to recognize the presence of growing numbers of older people as a blessing for society. Every generation can learn from the experience and wisdom of the generation that preceded it. Indeed the provision of care for the elderly should be considered not so much an act of generosity as the repayment of a debt of gratitude.” Pope Francis has been especially strong in promoting care of the elderly. (If anyone is looking for a topic for a Master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this is a good subject.) Francis talks



about caring for our elders and connecting them with our young people all the time. I direct you to *Amoris Laetitia* numbers 191-93, among many other places, where he tells us that our elders are “a living part of our community.” This phrase reminds me of a saying of the Akan tribe in Ghana, which calls seniors citizens “living ancestors”—an instructive phrase and a good attitude: living ancestors.

Let me direct you to the Bible for good examples of how we treat our elders well and poorly. These might be stories that young and old can read together; I bet each would be surprised at how differently the story looks to the other. See how the young Elihu waits for Job and his elders to speak before he makes his points. Observe not only how young Ruth refuses to leave her mother-in-law Naomi, but also how Naomi helps Ruth make good decisions with the wisdom of her long years. Do the matriarchs, patriarchs, and prophets continually tell us to honor our mothers and fathers because we’re not and need to be reminded to do so? Can we learn patience, especially about waiting for children and then grandchildren, from Sarah and Abraham, Elizabeth and Zechariah? Can our young people understand that wisdom comes from experience by reading about Moses’ travails or the stamina of faith presented by the many mothers and grandmothers who stood by Jesus when the men ran away?

Let’s look at Anna and Simeon as models of praise and patience for young people. They are prophets, even though we’re used to prophets being young like Jeremiah. You know the story from Luke 2, which we mark as the Feast of the Presentation each year on February 2. Simeon is not given an age, but we learn he is a righteous man waiting for his death, which Yahweh said wouldn’t come until he laid eyes on the Messiah. Nearby is Anna, given the precise age of 84, a holy woman who came to the Temple each day, like our own elders who attend daily Mass. Think of it: the old Anna and Simeon are the first people after Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the magi to see Jesus as who he truly was—and then to proclaim it.

Preaching on the feast of the Presentation in 2014, Pope Francis turned things around: “It is a meeting between young people who are full of joy in observing the Law of the Lord, and the elderly who are filled with joy for the action of the Holy Spirit,” he said. “It is a unique encounter between observance and prophecy, where young people are the observers and the elderly are prophetic!” You may have noticed that Francis likes to turn things around. Speaking not long after his election at World Youth Day in 2013 in Brazil, he said, “The elderly are also the future of a people.” Older people are often thought of as at an end, which means they’re no longer useful and can be disposed. Francis says no and presents Simeon and Anna as examples. “The elderly are also the future of a people.”



Our elders Anna and Simeon teach our young people several spiritual lessons. They teach us to keep praying. They teach us to have faith that God's timing is not our timing. They teach us to have trust even if God's promise is taking longer than we'd like. Finally, they teach that when we hear good news, we can't keep it to ourselves. Even at the end of their lives, these two prophetic senior citizens were still paying it forward. They biblically bridged the generation gap.

We can make that happen in our own communities on special days and every day—any day at all. Pope Francis has introduced an annual celebration of the fourth Sunday in July: the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly, which coincides with the feast of Jesus' grandparents Joachim and Anna—we don't talk about them like that, do we? Jesus had grandparents. Talk to your kids about that! But let's not allow one day a year do the trick, just as we don't need an anniversary to tell our spouse that we love them or Mother's Day to buy flowers. There are plenty of things we can do throughout the year to link our young people with our elders.

Francis gives us papal homework. Speaking a few days after his own 80th birthday in 2016, he said to a group of youngsters: "Speak to your grandparents. Ask them questions. They have the memory of history, the experience of living, and this is a great gift for you that will help you in your life journey." Where can this happen? Many places.

The first commitment is to make this a priority whether you are a grandparent, parent, or younger person. Don't say, "I don't have the time." As I tell my college students: if you can't find the time, make the time. Once you've done that, here are just a few ideas of cultivating interactions between seniors and youngsters—again: you are the pastoral ministers. You have the experience.

Families are separated. Pair up a grandparent without grandkids nearby in your parish with grandkids without local grandparents. And then do any of these activities.

Set up a movie night: one time the elder chooses, the next the youngster. And talk all the way through it. Explain things to each other. (This might also give parents a night out on their own for a date they haven't had in years.)

Oral interviews: our seniors will not always be with us. We've heard their stories, but have we preserved them? Have young people document their elders' experiences by taping them so video and audio can last beyond their lifetimes. Start with the funny stories we've all heard. Prompt them to tell the stories they've never told but time is running out to do so. "What was it like when you came to this country....when you first dated....when you started school....when you had something rough happen to you? What is your greatest regret?"

Maybe tie this to children's sacramental preparation and life lessons: "Grandma, what was your First Communion like? Grandpa, did you get confirmed? Tell me about Mommy's baptism. Tell



me about mine.” Volunteer together: “You were a refugee. How can we help refugees today?” Ask the tough questions: “Did you ever doubt God? Were you afraid you wouldn’t get a job? What did you think when your sister got cancer? How did you get through it? Did you ever march for a political or social cause? What happened? Were you scared? What was the cost? What helped you do hard things? Would you do it again?”

Make the ordinary extraordinary. Elders aren’t quick with tech; teenagers are. Have the young people help grandma with her laptop or zoom. Create mentors and protégés. Pair an experienced retired person with a certain skill with a young person thinking of picking it up. It can be anything: plumbing, nursing, social work, electrician, teacher, bus driver, a person starting their own business.

And now, my favorite: cook together. Share the family recipes, write them down even if you’ve never done that before (especially if you’ve never measured it beyond “a handful of this, a pinch of that”). Tell the story that goes with the recipe—a feast, a wedding, a birthday, or no special event at all but something you just love to make. It might go like this: “When we came to this country, we couldn’t find this ingredient, so we substituted it with that. When we didn’t have enough food, we stretched it this way.” And then—eat together, as often as possible. Reclaim the dinner table—with no smartphones.

Let me conclude. Just last month, Pope Francis directed our attention to the biblical figure of Judith, who lived to 105 years old. She spent her older years giving out wisdom, telling stories, passing on her lessons. As Francis said, “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 favor of the most disadvantaged who cannot afford any learning or who are abandoned in their loneliness.”

I ask our seniors to pay it forward as long as they can. I ask our youngsters to listen, to learn, and to act in ways that honor their elders.

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