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The Church Against the Throwaway Culture of the Elderly

Josephine Lombardi, Ph.D. Academic Dean, St. Augustine’s Seminary

Your Eminence Cardinal Farrell, Reverend Fathers, brothers and sisters in consecrated life, staff and members of the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, special guests of the conference. It is my honour to present on the topic of the Church Against the Throwaway Culture of the Elderly, a timely topic given the recent statistics on an aging population around the world. Although we may be tempted to think this is an issue unique to our times, The Psalmist (71:9) writes, “Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent,” indicating the fear of the elderly being thrown away has been a consistent theme that continues to challenge us today.

During our brief time together, I intend to unpack what is meant by the “throwaway culture,” an expression used by Pope Francis. Additionally, drawing on some global examples, I will identify some factors contributing to the throwaway culture of the elderly and conclude with some recommendations to promote greater awareness of this issue.

What is the throwaway culture?

It is not unusual to see the “throwaway culture” defined as “a culture in which the consumption and production of many goods is based on the practice

of discarding them after just one use.”¹ The Church, however, adds to this “culture of waste,”² human beings that risk being “discarded as unnecessary.”³ Pope Francis lamented a culture in which “(h)uman life, the person, are no longer seen as a primary value to be respected and safeguarded.”⁴ First used by Pope Francis in 2014,⁵ the expression, “the throwaway culture,” is a moral paradigm that represents a mindset in which material goods and human beings are viewed as disposable objects, “discarded as unnecessary.”⁶ Later in 2015, he decried “a civilization in which there is no room for the elderly or where they are thrown away,...there is something vile in this adherence to the throw-away culture.”⁷ In the same year, the phrase “throwaway culture” reappears in Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato si’*.⁸ Far more than a critique of a culture of environmental waste, as important as this topic is, this encyclical offered a critique of a culture that does not value human life, particularly people experiencing vulnerability, including the elderly who are viewed as expendable, seen as no longer holding meaning and value. He declared, “The culture of

¹ Justin Weinberg, “Against a Throwaway Culture in Philosophy,” July 7, 2025. In this article, Professor Weinberg laments the throwing away of past ideas.

² Pope Francis, General Audience for World Environmental Day, June 5, 2013.

³ Pope Francis, Address to the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations, 2013.

⁴ Pope Francis, Address to the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations, 2013.

⁵ See Pope Francis, Address to Members of the Diplomatic Corps, January 13, 2014.

⁶ Pope Francis, Address to the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations, 2013.

⁷ Pope Francis, General Audience, March 4, 2015.

⁸ See LS 22, 43.

relativism is the same disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects.”⁹ The same kind of thinking, he went on to write, leads “to the abandonment of the elderly who no longer serve our interests.”¹⁰ Although we understand that the “throwaway culture” applies to other vulnerable persons such as the unborn, the disabled, victims of human trafficking, and refugees,¹¹ today’s focus will be on the elderly.

In continuity with the Church’s Catholic Social Teaching, calling us to offer “material and moral support in old age and in times of illness, loneliness, or distress,” (CCC 2218), Pope Francis built on the wisdom of Pope Saint John Paul II who presented old age as an opportunity to apply Catholic Social Teaching, writing, “In view of all of this, the signs of human frailty which are clearly connected with advanced age become a summons to the mutual dependence and indispensable solidarity which link the different generations, inasmuch as every person needs others and draws enrichment from the gifts and charisms of all.”¹² Moreover, in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, he declared, “*Neglect of the elderly or their outright rejection are intolerable. Their*

⁹ LS 123.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pope Francis includes the unborn, persons with disabilities, people experiencing poverty, (LS 117), victims of human trafficking, (LS 91), and refugees (LS 25), to name a few examples.

¹² Pope Francis, Letter to the Elderly, October 10, 2019, 10.

*presence in the family... is of fundamental importance...*¹³ Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI, during a 2012 meeting at a retirement residence, said, “The quality of a society, I mean a civilization, is also judged by how it treats the elderly and the place it gives them in community life.”¹⁴ This is why, abandonment, according to Pope Francis, is a serious “illness” and a great injustice.¹⁵ Lamenting how the elderly risk being “cast aside,”¹⁶ to a place “where there is no room for the elderly or where they are thrown away,”¹⁷ Francis highlighted the loneliness that afflicts older persons. Remarking on the suffering caused by the false narrative that the elderly “are not useful,”¹⁸ he insisted on changing the messaging so that the elderly be seen as “the guardians of the roots” or “guardians of memory,”¹⁹ an expression used by Pope Saint John Paul II.²⁰ Old age, Pope Francis stated, “is one of the most urgent issues facing the human family at this time.”²¹ So fierce was his attention to this matter that he offered a cycle of 18 catecheses on old age between February

¹³ EV 94.

¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Visit to the Community of Sant’Egidio’s Home for the Elderly “Viva gli Anziani,” November 12, 2012.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, Speech to Participants at the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy for life, March 5, 2015.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, General Audience, June 1, 2022.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, General Audience, March 2, 2015.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, Sunday Angelus, January 29, 2023.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, Letter to the Elderly, October 10, 2019.

²⁰ See Pope Saint John Paul II, Letter to the Elderly, October 1, 1999.

²¹ Pope Francis, General Audience, February 23, 2022.

2022 and August 2022. Like Pope John Paul II, who remarked that the elderly have entered a “period of extraordinary grace”,²² Pope Francis, in continuity with his predecessors, affirmed this time of grace and was inspired to establish the World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly,²³ celebrating the importance of intergenerational dialogue, a topic for the next session of this conference.

Recently, Pope Leo XIV, referred to the elderly as “witnesses of hope,” and described old age as a time of grace, calling us “to help (the elderly) experience liberation, especially from loneliness and abandonment,”²⁴ a clear statement against the throwaway culture which, according to Pope Francis, is a form of abandonment, and “a form of cowardice,”²⁵ because as he said, “the elderly are not leftovers from life, scraps to be discarded.”²⁶

Clearly, abandonment of the elderly is an indication that we have forgotten the deeper meaning of the great commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves (Mt. 23:36-40), that to love, as Aristotle and Aquinas taught, is to will the good of the other for the sake of the other.²⁷ Never using his divine powers

²² Pope Saint John Paul II, To the Forum of Participants on Active Aging, September 5, 1980.

²³ World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly falls on or near the liturgical Memorial of Saints Joachim and Anne. Pope Francis instituted the World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly on January 31, 2021.

²⁴ Pope Leo XIV, Message of the Holy Father for the 5th World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly, July 27, 2025.

²⁵ Pope Francis, General Audience, June 1, 2022.

²⁶ Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly, July 25, 2021.

²⁷ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IX. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I/II, 26, a. 4.

for personal gain, but for our sake alone, Jesus shows us how to love,²⁸ representing the two great commandments as an antidote to the throwaway culture.²⁹

Sadly, however, the throwaway culture, Pope Francis noted, “coupled with contempt for old age, seen as frailty, as decay or disability, has been the dominant image of 20th century totalitarianism.”³⁰ This mindset, according to Pope Francis, has contributed to a culture that is, “accustomed to throwing people away. We want to remove our growing fear of weakness and vulnerability; but by doing so we increase in the elderly the anxiety of being poorly tolerated and neglected.”³¹ The good news is Pope Francis’s moral paradigm has been adapted by Catholic legal and medical professionals, especially those affirming a “culture of life,”³² noting that proper care for the elderly includes meeting social, legal, and spiritual needs as well as medical needs.³³ These experts can inform our understanding of some factors

²⁸ Gaudium et Spes reminds us that the gift of self includes the love of neighbour: “For this reason, love for God and neighbor is the first and greatest commandment. Sacred Scripture, however, teaches us that the love of God cannot be separated from love of neighbor.” 24.

²⁹ Mt. 22:36-40. See also, Deut. 6:4-5 and Lev. 19:18.

³⁰ Pope Francis, General Audience, February 23, 2022.

³¹ Pope Francis, General Audience, March 4, 2015.

³² EV 28.

³³ See Jeffrey W. Fuchs, and Joseph R. Fuchs, “Countering Throwaway Culture in Daily Clinical Practice,” *The Linacre Quarterly*, 2021, Vol. 88(1) 65-70. Catholic Medical Association. See also, Lucia A. Silecchia, *Laudato Si’ and the Tragedy of the “Throwaway Culture.”* CUA Columbus School of Law Legal Studies. Research Paper No. 2017-2 (2017).

contributing to the throwaway culture. Although it is beyond the scope of this brief presentation to offer an exhaustive analysis of these factors, I will share a few public policies and trends that have undermined our ability to protect the elderly from the danger of this throwaway culture.

1. Public policies that feed the throwaway culture

Amnesty International,³⁴ in a text focused on older persons rights,³⁵ provides disturbing analysis of policies enacted by governments during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that these policies “resulted in thousands of avoidable deaths in care homes around the world. These decisions also created unprecedented levels of social isolation among older people.”³⁶ Offering the contexts of Belgium, Spain, Italy, and the UK as case studies, Amnesty International discovered that “thousands of older residents in care homes lost their lives unnecessarily, due to neglectful government policies and under-resourced medical facilities. This risk was compounded for people who already lived with multiple health conditions, including physical disabilities and dementia.”³⁷ This was due in large part, according to the report, to inadequate

³⁴ Amnesty International is a global, independent human rights organization that researches and campaigns against abuses of human rights worldwide.

³⁵ Amnesty International, “Older People’s Rights.” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/older-people/>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

preparations and resources to assist care workers with the care of the elderly.³⁸ Shockingly, Amnesty International reports that National Health Services England “announced the catastrophic decision to urgently discharge patients from hospitals into care homes,” ...increasing the “risk of exposure,” contributing to 42 341 seniors dying in care homes in the first year of the pandemic. Not only this, BUT the UK did ALSO not allow older persons to be admitted to hospitals for more advanced care.³⁹ There’s more. The UK government, according to Amnesty International, imposed “blanket DO NOT ATTEMPT RESUSCITATION orders” on residents in many care homes, often without the consent of family members.⁴⁰ More devastating collateral damage came from the isolation of residents, not permitted to see their families and friends for many, many weeks at a time.

Scholars John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, in their research on the science of loneliness, found that “People with few social ties were at risk of dying from ischemic heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, cancer, and a broader category that included respiratory, gastrointestinal, and all other

³⁸ Ibid. The article reports there were staffing shortages and a lack of Personal Protective Equipment, and proper testing.

³⁹ Amnesty International, “Why we need a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons”, July 2, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act30/8189/2024/en/>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

causes of death.”⁴¹ In other words, a lack of connection, including physical touch, risks becoming “as injurious as obesity, lack of exercise, or the inhalation of carcinogenic smoke.”⁴² Physical expressions of care, hugs, for example, increase oxytocin levels, the feel-good hormone.⁴³ Conversely, loneliness, “inflicts pain, increases perceptions of stress, interferes with immune function, and impairs cognitive function.”⁴⁴ This research is critical to our understanding of the suffering endured by those of all ages and states of life living in isolation today, including Canadian seniors during the pandemic.

In April 2020, Canadians and people around the world, remained in shock, horrified at the discovery of 31 deaths at Montreal’s Herron Nursing Home in the province of Quebec.⁴⁵ Reports indicated that just 2 nurses were left to care for 130 elderly residents. The usual ratio, according to the Ontario Nurses’ Association, is 1:10 during the day and 1:14 for overnight care. Various reports discovered that the residents were found dehydrated, ‘lying listless in bed, unfed for days, with excrement seeping out of their diapers.’⁴⁶ The outrage

⁴¹ John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness. Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009), 93. This research was known to me in the 1980’s when I was an undergraduate in Gerontology at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴³ See p. 137.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴⁵ See Josephine Lombardi, “Senior Lives Matter: What Would the Good Samaritan Do?” May 5, 2020. www.josephinelombardi.com.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

moved Archbishop Terrence Prendergast, then Archbishop of Ottawa, to remind the faithful of their duty to provide the “right care for elders.”⁴⁷ Reacting to the news of nursing home deaths, Charles Camosy, in an opinion piece for the New York Times, wrote: “We tend to see this as a public health failure, but this is a moral failure.”⁴⁸ When it comes to the vulnerable, we have outsourced care and empathy to institutions that are ill equipped to care for the multidimensional needs of the elderly, a finding reported in Ontario’s Long-term Care COVID-19 Commission report, dated April 30, 2021.⁴⁹ The 426-page report goes on to admit that seniors and their family members “suffered terrible trauma,”⁵⁰ due to “inadequate infrastructure,”⁵¹ and “overcrowding.”⁵² These findings and more have led Amnesty International to declare that seniors “have the right to equal treatment during health emergencies.”⁵³ Sadly, in several countries, this is not the case, especially due to the throwaway culture fed by Euthanasia related legislation.

⁴⁷ Archbishop Pendergast, “National Mass for Life,” 2020.

⁴⁸ Charles Camosy, “What’s Behind the Nursing Home Horror.” *New York Times*, May 17, 2020. See also Charles Camosy, *Resisting Throwaway Culture: How a Consistent Life Ethic Can Unite a Fractured People*, (New York City Press, 2019).

⁴⁹ Ontario’s Long-term Care Covid-19 Commission Final Report, April 30, 2021. <https://files.ontario.ca/mltc-ltcc-final-report-en-2021-04-30.pdf>. In the 426-page report, the Commission found that the province’s long-term care homes had been neglected for decades, p. 2. Moreover, they were not prepared for the pandemic, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁵¹ Ibid., 7.

⁵² Ibid., 24.

⁵³ Amnesty International, Why We Need a UN Convention on the Rights of Persons.

In the September 2025 issue of *The Atlantic*, Elaine Plott Calabro, in an article titled, “Canada is Killing Itself,” assesses the impact of MAID, Medical Assistance in Dying, Canada’s euthanasia legal framework, legislated in 2016 and updated in 2021 to include another track for “seriously ill” patients whose death is not reasonably foreseeable. In Canada and in other select nations, palliative care is no longer limited to symptom and pain management. “Over the past decade,” Calabro writes, “practitioners of euthanasia have become as familiar as orthodontists or plastic surgeons...The difference is that, 10 years ago, what many of the attendees here do for work would have been considered homicide.”⁵⁴ About one in 20 deaths in Canada is due to MAID and the median age is 75.⁵⁵

Calabro shares shocking details of why people consider MAID, reporting that they feel like a “burden on an overtaxed system.” Similarly, a report

⁵⁴ Elaine Plott Calabro, “Canada is Killing Itself,” *The Atlantic*, August 11, 2025. September 2025 Issue, 1. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/09/canada-euthanasia-demand-maid-policy/683562/>

⁵⁵ Ibid. Currently, MAID is now offered to patients as part of the palliative care response using a two-track system. MAID exempts health practitioners who directly administer lethal medication, (euthanasia) or prescribe medication (assisted suicide). Catholic hospitals in Canada are not expected to offer MAID. Legislated on June 17, 2016, in Track 1, natural death is reasonably foreseeable. Initially, MAID/Euthanasia was offered to those who were “gravely ill...and already at the end of life.” In March 2021, the law was then extended to those in Track 2, as an amendment to Canada’s Criminal Code. Track 2 applies to patients who are “seriously ill...but not facing immanent death,”⁵⁵ in other words their death is not reasonably foreseeable. Each track has its own eligibility requirements, regarding medical conditions that are considered, “grievous and irremediable.” See next footnote.

prepared by Health Canada in 2024,⁵⁶ shows that nearly half of all Canadians who have died by MAID, viewed themselves as a burden to family and friends. One woman, quoted in Calabro's article, says that it was easier for patients to get MAID than to get a wheelchair. Another elderly gentleman, according to Calabro, wanted to die because he was lonely, perhaps feeling he had been thrown away. After discovering the reason behind his decision, his family started to visit more often, and he canceled his application. Another woman, cited in the same piece, admitted that she considered MAID because "she had fought unsuccessfully to get adequate home care services."⁵⁷ Abandonment due to policies rooted in the "culture of death,"⁵⁸ neglect, and a lack of resources has fed the throwaway culture and distorted our understanding of palliative care.

Remarking on the true purpose of palliative care, Pope Francis declared, "Palliative care is an expression of the truly human attitude of taking care of one another, ...It is a testimony that the human person is always precious, even if

⁵⁶ See Health Canada, Fifth Annual Report on Medical Assistance in Dying in Canada 2023. Published in 2024. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/hc-sc/documents/services/publications/health-system-services/annual-report-medical-assistance-dying-2023/annual-report-medical-assistance-dying-2023.pdf>. According to this report, the median age of MAID deaths in Canada is 75. Of those who have died, 47% reported loneliness as a cause of their suffering, no doubt due in part to the throwaway culture. In 2023 there were 19, 660 requests of which 15, 343 received MAID. 95.9% of these deaths were considered foreseeable. By 2027, it is expected that mental health issues alone will suffice to request MAID.

⁵⁷ Calabro, Canada is Killing Itself.

⁵⁸ EV 73

marked by illness and old age...Today “to honour” could also be translated as the duty to have the utmost respect and to take care of those who, due to their physical or social condition, may be left to die or “made to die”.⁵⁹ An interesting play on words. MAID does mean “made to die.” Referencing *Evangelium Vitae*,⁶⁰ in the same address, he affirms, “The objective of palliative care is to alleviate suffering in the final stages of illness and at the same time to ensure the patient appropriate human accompaniment.” How many seniors know the Church’s teaching on pain control?⁶¹ How many are making decisions without full knowledge and freedom because they are afraid. Sadly, there are seniors dying alone, without accompaniment and proper care, due largely to a culture of neglect, a throwaway culture.

Neglect and the Throwaway Culture

This culture of neglect and abandonment is especially prevalent during times of war and natural disaster. Amnesty International,⁶² observes that “(i)n armed conflict, older people are often the last to flee. They may fear losing their homes or their land, which can be their most vulnerable asset. Sometimes they

⁵⁹ Pope Francis, Address to the Pontifical Academy for Life, March 5, 2015.

⁶⁰ See EV 65.

⁶¹ The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has prepared an excellent resource, Horizons of Hope, a palliative care toolkit: <https://www.cccb.ca/faith-moral-issues/suffering-and-end-of-life/horizons-of-hope-a-toolkit-for-catholic-parishes-on-palliative-care/>

⁶² Amnesty International, Why We Need a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons, July 1, 2024.

have physical, intellectual, or other disabilities which make it more difficult to flee or to access information about evacuation.”⁶³ Sadly, the report concludes, “they die and are injured at disproportionate rates as a result, a trend” they have “found in Ukraine; northeast Nigeria, and Myanmar.”

This lack of regard for the dignity of the elderly is further compounded by greed, and a false perception of the elderly, a case in point witnessed in Gusiiland, Kenya. In a Statement on the Lynching of Elderly Women, 22 human rights organizations,⁶⁴ reported that the targeting and killing of older and poor women, accusing them of witchcraft, is decried as a heinous activity described as “abominable, discriminating, unjust, dehumanizing, and deeply oppressive.”⁶⁵ Similar reports from Ghana show that “(h)undreds of women have been cast out of their communities after being accused of witchcraft—often for **reasons that defy logic**: a child’s illness, a failed harvest, a family dispute, a bad dream. Most are elderly, widowed, poor, or otherwise vulnerable, with no sons or male relatives to protect them. Accused women often find themselves in one of the country’s six so-called “witch camps.”⁶⁶ Most of the

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ <https://www.helpage.org/silo/files/consortium-press-statement-on-lynching.pdf>

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Claire Thomas and Nicholas Azebire, “Banished and Forgotten: A Story of Women Exiled Over Witchcraft.” July 30, 2025. Pulitzer Centre. <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/banished-and-forgotten-story-women-exiled-over->

accusers, according to these reports, are relatives of deceased husbands. The authors of the statement from Kenya believe that the accusations are due to greed and land scarcity, urging “the Government of Kenya to implement a protocol that clearly provides for the protection of the property, land and inheritance rights of older women.” These women were thrown away and killed due to false accusations and greed.⁶⁷

We are reminded in the letter of James (1:27), that “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Clearly, in these contexts, this biblical imperative is not being followed. These are but a few factors contributing to the throwaway culture, rooted in a lack of appreciation for the dignity of the elderly, as “guardians of memory”, as “witnesses of hope,” as contributors to society, representing a “time of grace” for all generations. How do we combat this throwaway culture of the elderly? I will conclude with a few recommendations.

witchcraft#:~:text=July%20marked%20five%20years%20since,public%20support%20for%20legal%20reform

⁶⁷ Although greed of relatives may not lead to the killing of the elderly in other contexts, there are plenty of accounts of elderly people being financially exploited, signing documents without full knowledge and consent, leading to the transfer of assets or other decisions being made with their input.

1. The long-term care crisis has not improved, with reports of many countries struggling to manage, finance, and sustain life-giving services for an aging population.⁶⁸ Currently, there is an urgent need for system reforms, workforce development, and multi-stakeholder engagement.⁶⁹ It is important that we familiarize ourselves with existing laws regarding elder abuse and neglect, including reporting obligations in care facilities. Do these laws align with our teaching on the sanctity of life? Paraguay, for example, protects the elderly through the National Constitution, article 57, and Law 1885 which mandates comprehensive protection of older persons rights,⁷⁰ a concrete example of public policy that resists the throwaway culture. Lucia A. Silecchia, in an article on the tragedy of the throwaway culture, concludes by asking “hard questions about every new law: Who does the law “discard?” Who does it treat as less worthy of protection or dignity? Who does it attack and, equally important, who does it ignore? Who does it devalue? Who does it deprive of hope?”⁷¹ Formation of individuals who can be advocates for seniors, including

⁶⁸ See Jordan Rau, “What Long-term Care Looks Like Around the World.” November 14, 2023.

<https://kffhealthnews.org/news/article/dying-broke-long-term-care-other-countries/>

⁶⁹ See Mareike Ariaansa, Philipp Linden, Claus Wendt, Worlds of long-term care: A typology of OECD countries. February 19, 2021. Health Policy 125 (2021) 609–617.

⁷⁰ See the National Constitution of Paraguay, article 57 and Law no. 1885/2002 on Older Persons.

<https://social.un.org/ageing-working-group/documents/eighth/Inputs%20Member%20States/Paraguay.pdf>

⁷¹ https://www.guardianship.org/IRL/Resources/Documents/elder_law_need_emerges_4.pdf, 9.

their spiritual, medical, legal, and social needs should be a priority for the Church. Although there are associations of Catholic lawyers and physicians, like Physicians for Life, how can dioceses, seminaries, and faculties of theology contribute to this essential work of formation for advocacy and dialogue?

2. There is a need to educate clergy, consecrated, and lay persons regarding the science and cost of loneliness, the need for connection and human touch, and the dangers associated with outsourcing care and empathy to institutions that do not align with our values, and our emphasis on a “culture of life.” Although the ministry of visiting the sick and elderly is well established, more and more dioceses are training Ministers of Care to provide specialized spiritual and pastoral care to seniors, an essential ministry.
3. Engage the elderly in the life of the parish as volunteers and “witnesses of hope,” tapping into their wisdom, gifts, and institutional memory. Research on volunteering shows “improved quality of life, stronger social

networks, and reduced likelihood of isolation.”⁷² Dr. Adam Grant reports that “doing 3 random acts of kindness a week is enough to reduce depression, anxiety and loneliness. It's more beneficial than doing nice things for yourself.”⁷³ We need to challenge the narrative that we are no longer useful in old age, with proper messaging and imaging of the elderly. Moreover, we need regular reminders, that we, too, will experience old age. My late Sicilian mother, no doubt inspired by a saying that greets visitors of the Capuchin crypt in Palermo, would say, “today me, tomorrow you.”

4. It is essential that all states of life attend to the needs of our friends who are members of the clergy or religious communities, ensuring proper facilities and resources for their care. Many hope to continue to live in settings that allow for peaceful contemplation and access to spiritual resources. Sadly, however, a 2020 study showed that loneliness is a key issue for clergy.⁷⁴ This loneliness may be compounded by the many aging members who may have difficulty providing care for other members.

⁷² Employment and Social Development Canada, Report on Seniors, 2021.

⁷³ In a post on X, Dr. Adam Grant summarized the research found in Maria Naclerio, Erica A. Hornstein, and Naomi I. Eisenberger, “Exploring the Effects of Prosocial and Self-Kindness Interventions on Mental Health.” *Emotion*. 2025.

⁷⁴ See The Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate, *Enter by the Narrow Gate: Satisfaction and Challenges Among Recently Ordained Priests* (2020).

Furthermore, plans for residential care require knowledge of the unique charisms and culture of certain congregations. The needs of contemplative orders may differ from the needs of those active in other settings. No doubt, there are plenty of examples of dioceses, consecrated persons and laity giving time and resources to this important ministry.⁷⁵

5. Although the elderly suffer in ways unique to them, caregivers experience their own distinct suffering. This involves giving of ourselves, to the point of sacrifice, sacrificing our time, our resources, offering love, connection and empathy. For this reason, we need widespread catechesis on the Church's teaching on palliative care, and the value of our participation in the redemptive suffering of Jesus Christ. Resources such as, *Horizons of Hope*, a palliative care toolkit prepared for parishes by the CCCB, help us to resist the temptation to despair. Undermining our appreciation for the value of offering up our suffering, the throwaway culture has canceled the redemptive value of sacrifice, a key theme in Pope Saint John Paul II's 1984 Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris*. Sadly, however, policies that

⁷⁵ In the Archdiocese of Montreal, Canada, Sister Natalia Vazquez, a religious in the Mater Dei Congregation, is the coordinator for the human and spiritual accompaniment of priests. Since 2022 she has assembled a team of 40 registered volunteers to offer human and spiritual support to elderly priests.

exploit our fear of suffering, and lack of knowledge, coupled with too much a focus on useless distractions and self-preservation, keep us from assisting our brothers and sisters in need, creating obstacles to acts of mercy.

When asked to assist a senior in need, do we say, “If I stop and take the time to care for a senior known to me, family or friend, what will happen to me, my free time, my resources, my life?” Or do we dare to ask, “If I do not stop and take some time to care for a senior known to me, what will happen to him?” Who will take care of him?⁷⁶

6. Finally, the reminder of the biblical truth that we, though many, are one body.⁷⁷ In the Parable of the Judgement of Nations, Jesus reminds us that the least we do to our brothers and sisters, we do to him, (Mt. 25:31-46). At the end of our days, will the Lord say to us, “I was elderly and alone and you did not come to visit me, too busy with your useless distractions and

⁷⁶ Inspiration for this wording came from the last speech of Martin Luther King, Jr. On April 3, 1968, the day before Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered, he gave his last speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” He referred to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:31-37) to make a point regarding the support needed by the sanitation workers in the Deep South. He spends time giving some context to the parable, reminding the crowd that the road to Jericho is a “winding, meandering road. It’s really conducive for ambushing.” He proposes that the priest and the Levite are aware of the possibility of ambush and say to themselves, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

⁷⁷ Romans 12:5.

devices.⁷⁸ I was feeling unwell and confused and you exploited me, going as far as to falsely accuse me, taking my assets. I was dying and you deprived me of visits, proper palliative care, and human touch, instead, you offered me poison, leaving me to die in despair.” Or, will the Lord say, “I was elderly and alone and you visited me often, engaging in meaningful dialogue, respecting my dignity and including me in family events. I was feeling unwell and confused, and you protected me, ensuring my rights were not violated, respecting my dignity. I was dying and you accompanied me, holding me gently, and reminding me of the hope of everlasting life.” Today me, tomorrow, you.

Thank you and God bless.

⁷⁸ See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death. Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. (London: Viking Publishing, 1985).