



Our Mission

“To Help Grandparents Pass on The Faith and to Keep Prayer at The Heart of Family Life”

Webinar 16th May 2024 Notes for Catherine Wiley talk

Good afternoon I am grateful for the honour and privilege to share My thoughts with you - on this highly significant topic ‘Pastoral care of Grandparents and elderly.’

The mission statement of the Catholic Grandparents Association

“To help Grandparents pass on their faith and keep prayer at the heart of family life”

A mission we have strove to propagate over the past 25 years. Beginning with the first Pilgrimage for Grandparents, honouring Saint Joachim and St Anne, the Grandparents of Jesus, at the Marian Shrines of our Lady of Walsingham and the Shrine of our Lady of Knock in Ireland.

The CGA, has grown exponentially and is now a Worldwide organisation in over 70 countries. It is hardly surprising, Grandparents and Elderly everywhere instinctively recognize the enormous challenges posed by extreme individualism in a highly secularised society - threatening the moral, physical and spiritual lives of both the “not just the young” but most significantly the ever growing population of elderly .

How often have you heard it said from an older person, “I don’t want to live too long- and end up in a nursing home, I don’t want to be a burden to anyone!! How sad? What an indictment on us for the people who have loved and cared for us all our lives.

It is perhaps a cliché, or at least somewhat self-evident, to state that to be a grandparent is not simply a matter of fact borne out of biological or familial relationship, it is also, and preeminently, a vocation. Similarly, to be an older

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person brings with it a vocation to live life in a new way, relating to others with the special gifts that time and experience have brought.

Time and ageing may bring particular challenges, such as infirmity and illness, but these are neither inevitable nor essential to being either an older person or a grandparent. If they come, however, they bring with them a perspective and set of experiences that can be unique and precious to the individual and the whole community. Empathy, solidarity and an understanding of suffering can mean that older members of the community and grandparents are a natural place of support for younger people and grandchildren. We must, though, avoid stereotyping. Many grandparents and older people are highly active both physically and intellectually. In many countries they provide the backbone of core parts of the economy. Critically for the Church, it is older people and grandparents that frequently form the greater part of congregations and of the vast voluntary workforce that enables the institution to function on a local, national, and global scale. In particular, it is grandparents and older members of the Church community that are pivotal in the passing on of faith to younger people in a world where parents are often pressured in so many ways and unable, or unwilling, to engage in faith formation.

Time and experience of life bring many gifts and help to perfect many virtues. Experience and wisdom help to counter the false god of idealism in which goodness is often overlooked in pursuit of perfection. Those with grandchildren struggling to make sense of their identity in the contemporary world, or whose relationships have followed far from 'ideal' paths, know the essential humanity and potential for love present in all lives. They also know the power of acceptance in meeting people where they are, rather than where you would like them to be. Experience and hope provide a powerful counter to a tide of cynicism that too often assumes the worst and sees no way forward. In walking the long journey of accompaniment with adult children and grandchildren, through the complex and bewildering variety of challenges that life throws up, they often bring a longer view in which hope is rooted in concrete experiences. In this way, the vocation of the grandparent or of the older person is one of ambition and hope for others. Similarly, experience and faith enable the new to be embraced. Certain in their faith in God and in their fellows they can provide a beacon of light to those who are younger and less experienced. They recognize that the new does not mean abandonment of the old nor invalidation of tradition. To draw on St John

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Henry Newman, *‘to grow is to change and to be perfect is to have changed many times’*. When you have had to change many times, you can understand the fears and the opportunity that this brings and help to guide others. Experience and age bring most of all the opportunity to grow and perfect in love. This may mean spousal love for some, love of children and grandchildren for some, and of neighbour and wider humanity. Above all, for the Christian grandparent or older person, this opportunity is for love of God and for the moments of encounter with Christ that are afforded by relationships and experience. For a Catholic grandparent this is rooted in a spiritual life underpinned by the sacraments and prayer. All of these virtues come together in the witness, evangelism and catechetical mode of life that marks out the vocation of the grandparent and older person.

Virtues are, of course, known by their fruits and these are seen through ministry and service. I would like to suggest two key ministries regarding grandparents and older people. The first is the ministry **of** grandparents and older people. As outlined in what I have already mentioned, grandparents and older people are highly active in many ways. They serve each other in a way that shared experiences make possible and they help those younger than them through sharing this experience and insight and drawing on the virtues they have gained. Younger people find themselves faced with enormous and novel challenges in a world of technological and moral detachment from values which underpin what it is to be human. Grandparents provide a vital anchor in a world of uncertainty. Too often, the ministry of the older person or the grandparent is seen as that of one whose practical or active ministry is over. There is a sense that their role is to provide prayer to support those in active ministry. This does a disservice to both notions of ministry and of prayer. Prayer has never been a passive thing for those detached from active works. Even the most contemplative of individuals and communities have always recognized the intimate link between prayer and action. This intimacy of prayer and action defines the ministry of older people and grandparents. Grandparents are often major providers of care for adult children and grandchildren, facilitating the economic activity, education and devotional life essential of any family. It is often grandparents who bring young children to the sacraments and help in their formation. It is often older people who visit and support others who are infirm or in need. It is often the retired who clean churches, provide maintenance and hospitality that enables the

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broader communion of parish life. It is grandparents and older people who provide witness and embrace moments of evangelization to draw old and young into, or back to, the Church.

The ministry of grandparents and older people is then a complex and multidimensional one. It is a ministry that supports the ministry of others but also one that needs support as something of value in itself. Therefore, not only is there a ministry **of** grandparents and older people but we must also have a ministry **to** grandparents and older people. This will include a ministry to meet the needs of all people regardless of age, those needs that come with our fallen state and our inherent vulnerabilities. Some of these will be accentuated due to age and the needs of supporting multigenerational families and will need to take into account the special vulnerabilities of older people. Most of this ministry, however, will be to support the dynamic and ambitious work carried out by older people and grandparents every day. Their spiritual, emotional and practical needs can, and do, all receive huge support from the Church. We perhaps lack detailed understanding of the specific needs of older people and grandparents and I would call for greater study in this area to support their ministry and the ministry of those that support them. This will help to move beyond stereotypes and assumptions and will need to move beyond the ageism that provides a block to older people and grandparents in the Church and secular society. It will also help to challenge a prevailing view in secular society that devalues life, whether it is before birth or towards the end of life. In celebrating and recognizing the fullness of life in all its glory we can make concrete an ethic that protects the vulnerable.

In order to achieve this I will perhaps raise the greatest challenge. Whilst a ministry **to**, and a ministry **of** grandparents and older people are critical to the life of the Church, making it real in all of its potential will above all require a ministry **with** grandparents and older people. This will require listening to those who often are not heard, and taking seriously their experience and needs. In short, it will need a concrete manifestation of synodality and I believe and hope that this meeting today is a key part of that. This is why we have worked with Popes St John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI to build the World Day for Grandparents and the Prayer for Grandparents, We have worked with Pope Francis - to show to the world that grandparents and older people are central to life in all its diversity. We hope and pray that this great honour and gift, the establishment of a ‘World Day for Grandparents and Elderly’

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this celebration will receive the same level of attention and investment that other initiatives, such as World Youth Day, receive.

The Fourth World day takes place on the 28th of July, always the fourth Sunday in July closest to the Memorial Day for St Joachim and St Anne, you have time. We are not asking you to re-invent the wheel just to become part of it.

There are many well established Ministries for Grandparents and elderly now firmly established in Bishops Conference throughout the World. In particular in the Philippines,

We are clear, and want to make it known, that older people and grandparents have a role in the future and don't simply represent a continuity with the past. This sense that the old represent the past only and have no future is what underpins the ageism that devalues life in secular society and, unfortunately, is not absent from the Church.

Grandparents and older people stand ambitiously in their desire to serve their families, the Church and society as a whole. As a Church we have an opportunity to free that potential and show the world the value of life at all ages and stages of life.

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