

“In old age they will still bear fruit” (Psalm 92:15)

World Day for Grandparents and Elderly

Sunday, 24 July 2022

Papal Message to Grandparents & the Elderly

Dear Friends,

“In old age they will still bear fruit” (Ps 92:15). These words of the Psalmist are glad tidings, a true “gospel” that we can proclaim to all on this second World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly. They run counter to what the world thinks about this stage of life, but also to the attitude of grim resignation shown by some of us elderly people, who harbour few expectations for the future.

Many people are afraid of old age. They consider it a sort of disease with which any contact is best avoided. The elderly, they think, are none of their concern and should be set apart, perhaps in homes or places where they can be cared for, lest we have to deal with their problems. This is the mindset of the “throw-away culture”, which leads us to think that we are somehow different from the poor and vulnerable in our midst, untouched by their frailties and separated from “them” and their troubles. The Scriptures see things differently. A long life – so the Bible teaches – is a blessing, and the elderly are not outcasts to be shunned but living signs of the goodness of God who bestows life in abundance. Blessed is the house where an older person lives! Blessed is the family that honours the elderly!

Old age is not a time of life easily understood even by those of us who are already experiencing it. Even though it eventually comes with the passage of time, no one prepares us for old age, and at times it seems to take us by surprise. The more developed societies expend large sums on this stage of life without really helping people to understand and appreciate it; they offer healthcare plans to the elderly but not plans for living this age to the full. ^[1] This makes it hard to look to the future and discern what direction to take. On the one hand, we are tempted to ward off old age by hiding our wrinkles and pretending to be forever young, while on the other, we imagine that the only thing we can do is bide our time, thinking glumly that we cannot “still bring forth fruit”.

Retirement and grown children make many of the things that used to occupy our time and energy no longer so pressing. The recognition that our strength is ebbing or

the onset of sickness can undermine our certainties. The fast pace of the world – with which we struggle to keep up – seems to leave us no alternative but to implicitly accept the idea that we are useless. We can resonate with the heartfelt prayer of the Psalmist: “Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent” (71:9).

Yet that same psalm – which meditates on how the Lord has been present at every stage of our lives – urges us to persevere in hope. Along with old age and white hairs, God continues to give us the gift of life and to keep us from being overcome by evil. If we trust in him, we will find the strength to praise him still (cf. vv. 14-20). We will come to see that growing old is more than the natural decline of the body or the inevitable passage of time, but the gift of a long life. Aging is not a condemnation, but a blessing!

For this reason, we ought to take care of ourselves and remain active in our later years. This is also true from a spiritual standpoint: we ought to cultivate our interior life through the assiduous reading of the word of God, daily prayer, reception of the sacraments and participation in the liturgy. In addition to our relationship with God, we should also cultivate our relationships with others: first of all by showing affectionate concern for our families, our children and grandchildren, but also for the poor and those who suffer, by drawing near to them with practical assistance and our prayers. These things will help us not to feel like mere bystanders, sitting on our porches or looking out from our windows, as life goes on all around us. Instead, we should learn to discern everywhere the presence of the Lord. ^[2] Like “green olive trees in the house of God” (cf. Ps 52:10), we can become a blessing for those who live next to us.

Old age is no time to give up and lower the sails, but a season of enduring fruitfulness: a new mission awaits us and bids us look to the future. “The special sensibility that those of us who are elderly have for the concerns, thoughts and the affections that make us human should once again become the vocation of many. It would be a sign of our love for the younger generations”. ^[3] This would be our own contribution to the revolution of tenderness, ^[4] a spiritual and non-violent revolution in which I encourage you, dear grandparents and elderly persons, to take an active role.

Our world is passing through a time of trial and testing, beginning with the sudden, violent outbreak of the pandemic, and then by a war that is harming peace and

development on a global scale. Nor is it a coincidence that war is returning to Europe at a time when the generation that experienced it in the last century is dying out.

These great crises risk anaesthetizing us to the reality of other “epidemics” and other widespread forms of violence that menace the human family and our common home.

All this points to the need for a profound change, a conversion, that disarms hearts and leads us to see others as our brothers or sisters. We grandparents and elderly people have a great responsibility: to teach the women and men of our time to regard others with the same understanding and loving gaze with which we regard our own grandchildren. We ourselves have grown in humanity by caring for others, and now we can be teachers of a way of life that is peaceful and attentive to those in greatest need. This attitude may be mistaken for weakness or resignation, yet it will be the meek, not the aggressive and the abusive, who will inherit the earth (cf. Mt 5:5).

One fruit that we are called to bring forth is protecting the world. “Our grandparents held us in their arms and carried us on their knees”; ^[5] now is the time for us to carry on our own knees – with practical assistance or with prayer alone – not only our own grandchildren but also the many frightened grandchildren whom we have not yet met and who may be fleeing from war or suffering its effects. Let us hold in our hearts – like Saint Joseph, who was a loving and attentive father – the little ones of Ukraine, of Afghanistan, of South Sudan...

Many of us have come to a sage and humble realization of what our world very much needs: the recognition that we are not saved alone, and that happiness is a bread we break together. Let us bear witness to this before those who wrongly think that they can find personal fulfilment and success in conflict. Everyone, even the weakest among us, can do this. The very fact that we allow ourselves to be cared for – often by people who come from other countries – is itself a way of saying that living together in peace is not only possible, but necessary.

Dear grandparents, dear elderly persons, we are called to be artisans of the revolution of tenderness in our world! Let us do so by learning to make ever more frequent and better use of the most valuable instrument at our disposal and, indeed, the one best suited to our age: prayer. “Let us too become, as it were, poets of prayer: let us develop a taste for finding our own words, let us once again take up those taught by the word of God”. ^[6] Our trustful prayer can do a great deal: it can accompany the cry of pain of those who suffer, and it can help change hearts. We

can be “the enduring ‘chorus’ of a great spiritual sanctuary, where prayers of supplication and songs of praise sustain the community that toils and struggles in the field of life”. [7]

The World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly is an opportunity to proclaim once more, with joy, that the Church wants to celebrate together with all those whom the Lord – in the words of the Bible – has “filled with days”. Let us celebrate it together! I ask you to make this Day known in your parishes and communities; to seek out those elderly persons who feel most alone, at home or in residences where they live. Let us make sure that no one feels alone on this day. Expecting a visit can transform those days when we think we have nothing to look forward to; from an initial encounter, a new friendship can emerge. Visiting the elderly who live alone is a work of mercy in our time!

Let us ask Our Lady, Mother of Tender Love, to make all of us artisans of the revolution of tenderness, so that together we can set the world free from the spectre of loneliness and the demon of war.

To all of you, and to your loved ones, I send my blessing and the assurance of my closeness and affection. And I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me!

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 3 May 2022, Feast of the Apostles Philip and James

FRANCIS

[1] Catechesis on Old Age – 1. The Grace of Time and the Covenant of the Ages of Life (23 February 2022).

[2] Catechesis on Old Age – 5. Fidelity to God’s Visitation for the Next Generation (30 March 2022).

[3] Catechesis on Old Age – 3. Old Age, A Resource for Lighthearted Youth (16 March 2022).

[4] Catechesis on Saint Joseph – 8. Saint Joseph, Father of Tenderness (19 January 2022).

[5] Homily at the Mass for the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly (25 July 2021).

[6] Catechesis on the Family – 7. Grandparents (11 March 2015).

[7] Ibid.