

“Do not cast me off in my old age” (cf.Ps 71:9)

Sunday 28 July 2024

Papal Message

Dear brothers and sisters,

God never abandons his children, never. Even when our age advances and our powers decline, when our hair grows white and our role in society lessens, when our lives become less productive and can risk appearing useless. God does not regard appearances (cf.1 Sam 16:7); he does not disdain to choose those who, to many people, may seem irrelevant. God discards no stone; indeed, the “oldest” are the firm foundation on which “new” stones can rest, in order to join in erecting a spiritual edifice (cf.1 Peter 2:5).

Sacred Scripture as a whole is a story of the Lord’s faithful love. It offers us the comforting certainty that God constantly shows us his mercy, always, at every stage of life, in whatever situation we find ourselves, even in our betrayals. The Psalms are filled with the wonder of the human heart before God who cares for us despite our insignificance (cf.Ps 144:3-4); they assure us that God has fashioned each one of us from our mother’s womb (cf.Ps 139:13) and that even in hell he will not abandon our life (cf.Ps 16:10). We can be certain, then, that he will be close to us also in old age, all the more because, in the Bible, growing old is a sign of blessing.

At the same time, in the Psalms we also find this heartfelt plea to the Lord: “In my old age do not abandon me” (cf.Ps 71:9). Words that are strong, even crude. They make us think of the extreme suffering of Jesus, who cried out on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt27:46).

In the Bible, then, we find both the certainty of God’s closeness at every stage of life and the fear of abandonment, particularly in old age and in times of pain. There is no contradiction here. If we look around, we have no difficulty seeing that its words reflect an utterly evident reality. All too often, loneliness is the bleak companion of our lives as elderly persons and grandparents. Often, when I was Bishop of Buenos Aires, I would visit rest homes and realize how rarely those people received visits. Some had not seen their family members for many months.

There are many reasons for this loneliness: in many places, above all in the poorer countries, the elderly find themselves alone because their children are forced to emigrate. I think too of the many situations of conflict. How many of the elderly are left alone because men – youths

and adults – have been called to battle, and women, above all women with small children, have left the country in order to ensure safety for their children. In cities and villages devastated by war, many elderly people are left alone; they are the only signs of life in areas where abandonment and death seem to reign supreme. In other parts of the world, we encounter a false belief, deeply rooted in certain local cultures, that causes hostility towards the elderly, who are suspected of using witchcraft to sap the vital energies of the young; when premature death or sickness, or any other misfortune strike the young, the guilt is laid at the door of some elderly person. This mentality must be combatted and eliminated. It is one of those groundless prejudices from which the Christian faith has set us free, yet which continues to fuel generational conflict between the young and the elderly.

Yet if we think about it, this accusation that the elderly “rob the young of their future” is nowadays present everywhere. It appears under other guises even in the most advanced and modern societies. For example, there is now a widespread conviction that the elderly are burdening the young with the high cost of the social services that they require, and in this way are diverting resources from the development of the community and thus from the young. This is a distorted perception of reality. It assumes that the survival of the elderly puts that of the young at risk, that to favour the young, it is necessary to neglect or even suppress the elderly. Intergenerational conflict is a fallacy and the poisoned fruit of a culture of conflict. To set the young against the old is an unacceptable form of manipulation: “What is important is the unity of the different ages of life, which is the real point of reference for understanding and valuing human life in its entirety” (Catechesis, 23 February 2022).

The Psalm cited above – with its plea not to be abandoned in old age – speaks to a conspiracy surrounding the life of the elderly. This may seem an exaggeration, but not if we consider that the loneliness and abandonment of the elderly is not by chance or inevitable, but the fruit of decisions – political, economic, social and personal decisions – that fail to acknowledge the infinite dignity of each person, “beyond every circumstance, state or situation the person may ever encounter” (Declaration *Dignitas Infinita*, 1). This happens once we lose sight of the value of each individual and people are then judged in terms of their cost, which is in some cases considered too high to pay. Even worse, often the elderly themselves fall victim to this mindset; they are made to consider themselves a burden and to feel that they should be the first to step aside.

Then too nowadays many women and men seek personal fulfilment in a life as independent as possible and detached from other people. Group memberships are in crisis and individualism is celebrated: the passage from “us” to “me” is one of the most evident signs of

our times. The family, which is the first and most radical argument against the notion that we can save ourselves by ourselves, has been one of the victims of this individualistic culture. Yet once we grow old and our powers begin to decline, the illusion of individualism, that we need no one and can live without social bonds, is revealed for what it is. Indeed, we find ourselves needing everything, but at a point in life when we are alone, no longer with others to help, with no one whom we can count on. It is a grim discovery that many people make only when it is too late.

Solitude and abandonment have become recurrent elements in today's social landscape. They have multiple roots. In some cases, they are the result of calculated exclusion, a sort of deplorable "social conspiracy"; in others, tragically, a matter of an individual's personal decision. In still other cases, the elderly submit to this reality, pretending that it is their free choice. Increasingly, we have lost "the taste of fraternity" (Fratelli Tutti, 33); we find it difficult even to think of an alternative.

In many older persons we can observe the sense of resignation described in the Book of Ruth, which tells the story of the elderly Naomi who, after the death of her husband and children, encourages her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to return to their native towns and their homes (cf. Ruth 1:8). Naomi – like many elderly people today – is afraid of remaining alone, yet she cannot imagine anything different. As a widow, she knows that she is of little value in the eyes of society; she sees herself as a burden for those two young women who, unlike herself, have their whole lives before them. For this reason, she considers it best to step aside, and so she tells her young daughters-in-law to leave her and to build a future in other places (cf. Ruth 1:11-13). Her words reflect the rigid social and religious conventions of her day, which apparently seal her own fate.

The biblical narrative then presents us with two different responses to Naomi's words and to old age itself. One of the two daughters-in-law, Orpah, who loves Naomi, kisses her and, accepting what seemed the only solution possible, goes her way. Ruth, however, does not leave Naomi's side and, to her surprise, tells her: "Do not press me to leave you" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth is not afraid to challenge customs and inbred patterns of thought. She senses that the elderly woman needs her and she courageously remains at her side in what will be the start of a new journey for both. To all of us, who are accustomed to the idea that solitude is our unavoidable lot, Ruth teaches that in response to the plea "Do not abandon me", it is possible to say, "I will not abandon you". Ruth does not hesitate to subvert what seemed to be an irreversible situation: living alone need not be the only alternative! Not by chance, Ruth – who remained at the side of the elderly Naomi – was an ancestor of the Messiah (cf. Mt 1:5),

of Jesus, Immanuel, “God with us”, the one who brings God’s own closeness and proximity to all people, of all ages and states of life.

Ruth’s freedom and courage invite us to take a new path. Let us follow in her footsteps. Let us set out with this young foreign woman and the elderly Naomi, and not be afraid to change our habits and imagine a different kind of future for our elderly. May we express our gratitude to all those people who, often at great sacrifice, follow in practice the example of Ruth, as they care for an older person or simply demonstrate daily closeness to relatives or acquaintances who no longer have anyone else. Ruth, who chose to remain close to Naomi, was then blessed with a happy marriage, a family, a new home. This is always the case: by remaining close to the elderly and acknowledging their unique role in the family, in society and in the Church, we will ourselves receive many gifts, many graces, many blessings!

On this Fourth World Day devoted to them, let us show our tender love for the grandparents and the elderly members of our families. Let us spend time with those who are disheartened and no longer hope in the possibility of a different future. In place of the self-centred attitude that leads to loneliness and abandonment, let us instead show the open heart and the joyful face of men and women who have the courage to say “I will not abandon you”, and to set out on a different path.

To all of you, dear grandparents and elderly persons, and to all those who are close to you I send my blessing, accompanied by my prayers. And I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 25 April 2024

Francis