



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

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[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Old Age: 14. *The joyful service of faith that is learned in gratitude* (cf. Mk 1, 29-31)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We have heard the simple and touching account of the healing of the mother-in-law of Simon — who is not yet called Peter — in Mark’s version of the Gospel. The brief episode is told with slight, yet evocative variations, also in the other two synoptic Gospels. “Simon’s mother-in-law lay sick with a fever”, writes Mark. We do not know if it is a mild ailment, but in old age even a simple fever can be dangerous. When one is old, one is no longer in control of one’s body. One has to learn to choose what to do and what not to do. The vigour of the body fails and abandons us, even though our heart does not stop yearning. One must then learn to purify desire: be patient, choose what to ask of the body and of life. When we are old, we cannot do the same things we did when we were young: the body has another pace, and we must listen to the body and accept its limits. We all have them. I too have to use a walking stick now.

Illness weighs on the elderly in a new and different way compared to when one is young or an adult. It is like a hard blow that falls on an already difficult time. In the elderly, illness seems to hasten death and, in any case, diminish that time we have to live, which we already consider short. The doubt lurks that we will not recover, that “this time it will be the last time I get sick...”, and so on: these ideas come. One cannot dream of hope in a future that now appears non-existent. A renowned Italian writer, Italo Calvino, noted the bitterness of the elderly who suffer the

loss of the things of the past, more than they enjoy the coming of the new. But the Gospel scene we have heard helps us to hope and already offers us a first lesson: Jesus does not visit that sick elderly woman by himself: he goes there together with the disciples. And this makes us think a bit.

It is precisely the *Christian community* that must take care of the elderly: relatives and friends, but the community. Visiting the elderly must be done by many, together and often. We should never forget these three lines of the Gospel, especially now that the number of elderly people has grown considerably, also in relation to the young, since we are in this demographic winter, we have fewer children, and there are many elderly people and few young ones. We must feel a responsibility to visit the elderly who are often alone, and present them to the Lord with our prayers. Jesus himself will teach us how to love them. “A society truly welcomes life when it recognizes that it is also precious in old age, in disability, in serious illness and even when it is fading” (*Message to the Pontifical Academy for Life*, 19 February 2014).

Life is always precious. When Jesus sees the sick elderly woman, he takes her by the hand and heals her: the same gesture that he uses to resuscitate that young girl who had died. He takes her by the hand, makes her stand and heals her, by putting her back on her feet. With this tender gesture of love, Jesus gives the disciples their first lesson, namely, salvation is announced or, better, communicated through attention to that sick person; and the woman’s faith shines in gratitude for God’s tenderness that leaned over her. I return to a theme I have repeated in these catecheses: this throwaway culture seems to delete the elderly. Yes, it does not kill them, but it deletes them socially, as if they were a burden to carry: it is better to conceal them. This is a betrayal of our own humanity. This is the worst thing. This is selecting life according to usefulness, according to youth, and not with life as it is, with the wisdom of the elderly, with the limits of the elderly. The elderly have much to give us: there is the wisdom of life. They have much to teach us. This is why we have to also teach children to take care of their grandparents and to visit them. The dialogue between young people and grandparents, children and grandparents, is fundamental for society. It is fundamental for the Church, it is fundamental for the health of life. Where there is no dialogue between the young and the old, something is lacking and a generation grows up without a past, that is, without roots.

If the first lesson was given by Jesus, the second is given to us by the elderly woman, who arose and “served them”. Even in old age one can, or rather, one has, to serve the community. It is good for the elderly to continue to cultivate the responsibility of serving, overcoming the temptation to step aside. The Lord does not reject them. On the contrary, he restores to them the strength to serve. And I like to note that there is no special emphasis in the account on the part of the evangelists: it is the normality of following, which the disciples will learn about in its full scope, along the path of formation they will experience in the school of Jesus. The elderly who retain the disposition for healing, consolation, intercession for their brothers and sisters — be they disciples, centurions, people disturbed by evil spirits, those who are rejected — are perhaps the highest witness of the purity of this gratitude that accompanies faith. If the elderly, instead of being

rejected and dismissed from the scene of events that mark a community's life, were placed at the centre of collective attention, they would be encouraged to exercise the valuable ministry of gratitude towards God, who forgets no one. The gratitude of elderly people for the gifts received from God during their life, as Peter's mother-in-law teaches us, restores to the community the joy of living together, and confers to the faith of the disciples the essential feature of its destination.

But we must learn well that the spirit of intercession and service, which Jesus prescribes to all his disciples, is not simply a matter for women. There is no trace of this limitation in Jesus' words and gestures. The evangelical service of gratitude for God's tenderness is not in any way written according to the grammar of the man who is master and the woman who serves. However, this does not detract from the fact that women can teach men things they find more difficult to understand, regarding the gratitude and tenderness of faith. Before the Apostles had understood [this] along their path of following Jesus, Peter's mother-in-law showed the way to them too. And the special gentleness of Jesus, who touched her hand and gently leaned over her, clearly shows, from the very beginning, his special sensitivity towards the weak and the sick, which the Son of God had certainly learned from his Mother. Please, let us make sure that the elderly, that grandparents, are close to children, to the young, to hand down this memory of life, to pass on this experience of life, this wisdom of life. To the extent to which we ensure that the young and the old are connected, to this extent there will be more hope for the future of our society.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the various pilgrimage groups from the United States of America. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you!

And please, let us not forget the martyred people of Ukraine. Let us not become accustomed to living as if the war were something far away. May our memory, our affection, our prayer and our help always be close to these people who are suffering so much and experiencing a true martyrdom.

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *the sick*, to *young people* and to *newlyweds*. Tomorrow we will celebrate the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, whose [celebration] in Italy, has been moved to next Sunday. May the Eucharist, a mystery of love, be for all of you a source of grace and light that illuminates life's pathways, support in times of hardship and sublime comfort in everyday suffering. I offer my blessing to all of you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on the meaning and value of old age in the light of God's word, we now consider the healing of Saint Peter's mother-in-law. The Gospel of Mark tells us that as she lay in bed with a fever, Jesus took her by the hand and the fever left her; and she began to serve them (cf. 1:29-31). The fact that Jesus wished to heal her in the company of the disciples reminds us that the entire Christian community is called to be present to our brothers and sisters in need. We proclaim Christ's salvation and the hope offered by the Gospel precisely by reaching out to those who, like so many elderly people in our communities, feel isolated and even abandoned. Peter's mother-in-law then responds with gratitude for the gift of God's mercy by getting up and immediately serving her guests. Within the Christian community, the elderly offer a precious service by their own example of gratitude for the gift of faith and the experience of the Lord's healing touch in their lives. They teach us that Christian discipleship is expressed in acts of charity, inspired by gratitude for the merciful love that touches and transforms our lives.