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Being elderly is a gift of God - Pontifical Academy for Life

The Pontifical Academy for Life publishes a document highlighting the plight of the elderly amid the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, entitled "Old age: our future. The elderly after the pandemic".

By Davide Dionisi

"Old age: our future. The elderly after the pandemic" is the title of a document published on Tuesday by the Pontifical Academy for Life, together with the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. The document proposes a reflection on the lessons to be drawn from the tragedy caused by the spread of Covid-19, on its consequences for today and for the near future of our societies. 

The pandemic has produced a twofold awareness “on the one hand, the interdependence of everyone, and on the other greater attention to inequalities. We are all in the same storm, but it is increasingly evident that we are on different boats, and that the least seaworthy boats are sinking every day. It is essential to rethink the whole planet’s development model,” reads the document.

It picks up the reflection already begun with the Note of 30 March 2020 (Pandemic and Universal Brotherhood), continued with the Note of 22 July 2020 (The *Humana Communitas* in the Age of the Pandemic: Untimely Meditations on Life’s Rebirth), and the joint document with the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (Vaccine for All. 20 Points for a More Just and Healthy World) of 28 December 2020.

The goal is to “propose the way of the Church, teacher of humanity, to a world changed by Covid-19, to women and men in search of meaning and hope for their lives.”

Covid-19 and the elderly

During the first wave of the pandemic, a substantial portion of deaths from Covid-19 occurred in institutions for the elderly, places that were supposed to protect the “most fragile part of society” and where instead death struck disproportionately more than in the home and family environment.

“What happened during Covid-19 prevents the problem of elder care from being settled by, on the one hand, looking right away for scapegoats, or, on the other, by a chorus of praise for excellent results of those who kept an institution free of contagion. What we need is a new vision, a new paradigm that helps society as a whole to care for the elderly,” the document said.

By 2050, two billion people will be over the age of 60

The document highlights that from a statistical-sociological point of view, men and women generally have a longer life expectancy today, representing a major demographic transformation which represents a major “cultural, anthropological and economic challenge”.

According to data from the World Health Organization, in 2050 there will be two billion people over 60 in the world: One in five people will be elderly. It is therefore essential to “make our cities inclusive and welcoming places for the elderly and, in general, for all forms of frailty in all its manifestations.”

Being elderly is a gift from God

In our society, the idea of old age as an unhappy age often prevails, often understood only as the age of care, need and expense for medical care. “Being elderly is a gift from God and an enormous resource, an achievement to be safeguarded with care,” the document

continues, "even when the disease becomes disabling and the need for integrated, high-quality care emerges. And it is undeniable that the pandemic has reinforced in all of us the awareness that the richness of our years is a treasure to be valued and protected."

New model for weakest members of society

As for assistance, the Pontifical Academy for Life indicates a new model especially for the most fragile inspired above all by the person. "The implementation of this principle implies structured intervention at different levels to establish a continuum of care between one's home and appropriate external services, without traumatic breaks that are inappropriate to the fragility of growing old," specifies the document. It notes that "nursing homes should be redeveloped into a socio-health 'continuum', that is, offer some of their services directly in the homes of the elderly: hospitalization at home, taking care of the single person with low or high-intensity assistance responses based on personal needs, where integrated social and health care and home care services are the pivot of a new and modern paradigm."

At the same time, "a wider network of solidarity must be reinvented, not necessarily and exclusively based on blood ties, but on affiliations, friendships, common feeling, mutual generosity in responding to the needs of all."

Encounter between generations

The document evokes an "encounter" that can bring into the body of society "that new sap of humanism that would make society more supportive."

Pope Francis has repeatedly urged young people to stay close to their grandparents, the document notes, adding that "the aging man is not approaching the end, but the mystery of eternity; to understand it he needs to get close to God and to live in relationship with Him. Taking care of the spirituality of the elderly, of their need for intimacy with Christ and sharing of faith is a task of charity in the Church."

The document further highlights that it is only thanks to the elderly that young people can rediscover their roots, and it is thanks to the young that the elderly can recover their ability to dream.

Frailty as Magisterium

The document notes that we must understand the precious witness that the elderly bear with their frailty as a "magisterium, that is, a real teaching."

"Old age must also be understood in this spiritual framework," the document emphasizes. "It is the ideal age for abandonment to God. As the body weakens, psychic vitality, memory and mind grow dim, the human person's dependence on God becomes



increasingly evident.”

Cultural turning point

Finally, the document makes an appeal to “the whole of civil society, the Church and the different religious traditions, the world of culture, school, volunteering, entertainment, the manufacturing classes and classical and modern social communications,” to feel the responsibility of suggesting and supporting new and targeted measures “that make it possible for the elderly to remain in the homes they know and in any case in familiar environments that look more like a home than a hospital.”

This, the document insists, is the cultural change to be implemented.” (*Translated from the Italian original*)

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