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Francis: before the myth of appearances, the elderly bear witness to lasting values

More than seven thousand representatives of the elderly, including many grandparents and members of the National Association of Elderly Workers and the “Feder Anziani” Italian Senior Federation attended an audience with Pope Francis in the Paul VI Hall this morning. The audience was the climax of a day of prayer and reflection by senior citizens in the context of the “Festa dei Nonni”, a celebration of grandparents.

The Holy Father expressed his gratitude to all those present and recalled with affection those who were unable to be there, alone or in ill health, and manifested his spiritual closeness. “The Church looks to the elderly with affection, recognition and great esteem. They are an essential part of the Christian community and of society and, in particular, represent the roots and memory of the people. Yours is an important presence, because your experience is a valuable treasure, indispensable for looking to the future with hope and responsibility. Your maturity and wisdom, accumulated over the years, can help the youngest, supporting them in their journey of growth and openness to the future, in the search for their path. Indeed, the elderly show that, even in the most difficult times, one must never lose faith in God and in a better future. They are like trees that continue to bear fruit even under the weight of the years”.

Francis noted that there are many elderly people who generously offer their time and talents in the service of others. For example, in parishes, devoting themselves to the maintenance of the house of the Lord, to catechesis, and assisting in the liturgy. Many grandparents also care for their grandchildren, transmitting to them their experience as well as the spiritual values of a community and a people. In this context, the Pope recalled that in countries afflicted by religious persecutions grandparents have transmitted the faith to the new generations, even leading children to receive baptism clandestinely.

“In a world such as ours today, in which often the myth of force and appearance prevails, you have the mission of bearing witness to the values that truly count, and which remain for ever, as they are inscribed in the heart of every human being and guaranteed by the word of God. Precisely as people of advanced years, you – or rather we, as I too form part of this group – are called upon to work for the development of a culture of life, showing that every season of existence is a gift from God, and has its beauty and its importance, even if marked by frailty”.

The Pope emphasised that while many elderly people continue to help others, there are others who live with illness or with difficulties of mobility and are in need of assistance. He gave thanks to God for the many people

and structures dedicated to the daily assistance of the elderly, “for favouring appropriate human contexts in which each person can live in a dignified way this important phase in their life. The institutions which offer a home to the elderly are called to be places of humanity and loving care, where the most vulnerable are neither forgotten nor neglected, but rather visited, remembered and protected like elder brothers or sisters. In this way we express our acknowledgement of those who have given so much to the community and are its root”.

He went on to underline that both institutions and other social realities can make an important contribution to enabling the elderly to realise their full potential through active participation in society, and to ensuring that their dignity is always respected. However, it is necessary to “combat the harmful throwaway culture, which marginalises the elderly, regarding them as ‘unproductive’. Public leaders, cultural, educational and religious entities, and all people of good will, must engage in building an increasingly welcoming and inclusive society”. Emphasising the need to oppose this throwaway culture, the Pope narrated a story his grandmother used to tell him about a family in which the grandfather began to suffer from health problems, and struggled to eat without mess. The father therefore arranged a table for him to eat alone in the kitchen. Upon returning home a few days later, the father found one of his children playing with woodworking tools. When he asked the child what he was doing, he answered, ‘I am making a table, so when you are old you can eat alone’. “Children are very attached to their grandparents, and understand things that only their grandparents can explain with their life and their attitude. This throwaway culture tells us that when you are old, you are out. ... but the elderly have many things to tell us. ... We must not let this throwaway culture continue. There must always be an inclusive culture”.

Another key point was the importance of promoting the bond between generations. “The future of the people requires the encounter between the young and the elderly. The young are the vitality of a journeying people, and the elderly sustain this vitality with memory and wisdom. Speak with your grandchildren, and let them ask you questions. ... They do different things, they like different music, but they need the elderly, and this continuous dialogue, to give them wisdom. It is very good for me to read about when Joseph and Mary took the baby Jesus to the temple where they met the two grandparents, who were the wisdom of the people; they praised God because this wisdom was able to continue with this child. Jesus was received in the temple not by the priest, but by grandparents”.

“Dear grandparents”, he concluded, “thank you for your example of love, of commitment and of wisdom. Continue to bear courageous witness to these values. Do not let society be lacking in your smile and the beautiful brightness of your eyes: may society see them! I accompany you in prayer, and ask you too not to forget to pray for me”. Before imparting his blessing, the Pope asked those present in the Paul VI Hall to pray to Jesus’ grandmother, St. Anne, in silence, asking for her help to be good and wise grandparents.
