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Audience with members of the National Association of Senior Workers

This morning the Holy Father Francis received in audience, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the members of the National Association of Senior Workers on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the Association.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I am pleased to meet you on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the founding of your "National Association of Senior Workers". I greet you all, starting with the president, whom I thank for his introduction. I would like to pick up on the emphasis he has placed on seniority as a season of *giving* and also as a season of *dialogue*.

Elderly people, on a social level, should not be considered as a burden, but for what they really are, that is, a resource and a wealth. They are the memory of a people! This is demonstrated by their contribution to voluntary activities, precious opportunities to live the dimension of gratuitousness. Healthy elderly people can offer a few hours of their time to care for people in need, thus enriching themselves. Volunteering is an experience that is good for both those who receive it and those who do it. Commitment to others can counteract the perception of loneliness, improve cognitive performance and increase mental well-being. In other words, engaging in volunteering promotes what is called "active aging", helping to improve the quality of life once important dimensions of one's identity are no longer present, such as the role of parents or the professional role after retirement.

In recent years we have witnessed an expansion of the commitment of the elderly in volunteering and associations, as an optimal ground for the realization of active seniority and a protagonist in the construction of a

community of solidarity. The seventy years of your Association are a demonstration of how the elderly are able to self-organize and participate. The biggest challenge for society in the coming years is to promote the human resources that older people bring to the community with increasing effectiveness. It is a matter of activating, on the territory, solidarity networks that have as a reference the elderly as active actors and not only the recipients of welfare interventions. It will therefore be important that the elderly are considered bearers not only of needs, but also of new demands, or as I often say - echoing the Bible - of "dreams" (cf. *Gl 3: 1*) - that the elderly are dreamers - dreams, however, full of memory, not empty, vain, like those of certain advertisements; the dreams of the elderly are imbued with memory, and therefore fundamental for the journey of the young, because they are the roots. From the elderly comes that sap that makes the tree grow, makes it bloom, gives new fruits.

And so we come to the second aspect: old age as the season of *dialogue*. The future of a people necessarily presupposes a dialogue and an encounter between the elderly and the young for the construction of a society that is more just, more beautiful, more supportive, more Christian. Young people are the strength of a people's journey and the elderly strengthen this further with their memory and wisdom. Old age is a time of grace, in which the Lord renews His call to us: He calls us to preserve and pass on our faith, He calls us to pray, especially to intercede; He calls us to be close to those in need. The elderly and grandparents have a unique and special ability to grasp the most problematic situations. And when they pray for these situations, their prayer is strong, it is powerful! Grandparents, who have been blessed to see their children's children (cf. *Ps 128: 6*), are entrusted with a great task: to transmit the experience of life, the history of a family, a community, a people.

By considering and living old age as the season of *giving* and the season of *dialogue*, the traditional stereotype of the elderly is opposed: sick, disabled, dependent, isolated, besieged by fears, left aside, with a weak identity for the loss of a social role. At the same time, avoids focusing the general attention mainly on costs and risks, placing more emphasis on the resources and potential of the elderly. Unfortunately, young people are frequently discarded because they do not have a job, and the elderly are discarded with the pretense of maintaining a "balanced" economic system, at the centre of which there is not the human person, but money. And this is not the case. The future - and this is not an exaggeration - will be in the dialogue between young and old. If grandparents do not dialogue with grandchildren, there will be no future. We are all called upon to counter this poisonous throwaway culture. We are called to build with tenacity a different society, more welcoming, more human, more inclusive, which does not need to discard those who are weak in body and mind, rather, a society that measures its "pace" precisely by these people.

Dear friends, I thank you for what you do in the field of promoting older people. Be a joyful and wise presence everywhere. Tomorrow the Church begins to pray in preparation for Christmas by invoking wisdom, the day of wisdom, invoking wisdom. We need the wisdom and experience of the elderly to build a world that is more respectful of the rights of all. Continue with courage to bring your precious witness to the different environments in which you work. For my part, I accompany you with my prayers, and I invoke the Lord's blessing upon you and upon your intentions and plans for good. And, do not forget, talk to the young, but not to berate them, no: to listen to them, and then to sow something. This dialogue is the future! And don't forget to pray for me. Thank you!
