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Audience with the participants in the International Congress “The richness of many years”, organized by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life

This morning the Holy Father Francis received in audience, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the participants in the First International Congress on the pastoral care of the elderly on the theme “The richness of many years”, organized by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, and taking place from 29 to 31 January at the “Augustinianum” Congress Centre in Rome.

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I cordially welcome you, participants in the first International Congress on the pastoral care of the elderly, “The richness of many years”, organized by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, and I thank Cardinal Farrell for his kind words.

The “richness of many years” is a richness of people, of each individual person who has many years of life, experience and history behind them. It is the precious treasure that takes form in the journey of life of each man and woman, whatever their origins, provenance, and economic or social conditions. Life is a gift, and when it is long it is a privilege, for oneself and for others. Always, it is always this way.

In the twenty-first century, old age has become one of the distinctive features of humanity. Over a period of just a few decades, the demographic pyramid - which once rested upon a large number of children and young people and had at the top just a few elderly people - has been inverted. If once the elderly could have populated a small state, nowadays they could populate an entire continent. In this regard, the enormous presence of the elderly constitutes a novelty for every social and geographic environment worldwide. In addition, different seasons of life correspond to old age: for many, it is the age in which productive efforts cease, strength declines and the signs of illness, the need for help, and social isolation appear; but for many it is the beginning of a long period of psycho-physical well-being and freedom from work commitments.

In both situations, how can these years be lived? What meaning can be given to this phase of life, which for many people can be long? Social disorientation and, in many respects, the indifference and rejection that our societies manifest towards the elderly demand not only of the Church, but of all of us, a serious reflection to learn to grasp and to appreciate the value of old age. Indeed, while on the one hand states must learn to face the new demographic situation on the economic level, on the other, civil society needs values and meaning for the third and fourth ages. And here, above all, is the contribution of the ecclesial community.

That is why I welcomed with interest the initiative of this conference, which focused attention on pastoral care for the elderly and initiated a reflection on the implications of a substantial presence of grandparents in our parishes and societies. I ask that this does not remain an isolated initiative, but that it instead mark the beginning of a journey of pastoral exploration and discernment. We need to change our pastoral habits in order to respond to the presence of so many older people in families and communities.

In the Bible, longevity is a blessing. It confronts us with our fragility, with our mutual dependence, with our family and community ties, and above all with our divine sonship. Granting old age, God the Father gives us time to deepen our knowledge of Him, our intimacy with Him, to enter ever more into His heart and surrender ourselves to Him. This is the time to prepare to deliver our spirit into His hands, definitively, with childlike trust. But it is also a time of renewed fruitfulness. "They will still bear fruit in old age" says the psalmist (*Ps 92:14*). God's plan of salvation, in fact, is also carried out in the poverty of weak, sterile and powerless bodies. From the barren womb of Sarah and the centenarian body of Abraham the Chosen People was born (cf. *Rom 4:18-20*). From Elizabeth and the old Zechariah, John the Baptist was born. The elderly person, even when he is weak, can become an instrument of salvation history.

Aware of this irreplaceable role of the elderly, the Church becomes a place where generations are called to share in God's plan of love, in a relationship of mutual exchange of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This intergenerational sharing obliges us to change our gaze towards older people, to learn to look to the future together with them.

When we think of the elderly and talk about them, especially in the pastoral dimension, we must learn to change the tenses of verbs a little. There is not only the past, as if, for the elderly, there were only a life behind them and a mouldy archive. No. The Lord can and wants to write with them also new pages, pages of holiness, of service, of prayer... Today I would like to tell you that the elderly *are also the present and the future of the Church*. Yes, they are also the future of a Church that, together with the young, prophesies and dreams! This is why it is so important that the elderly and the young speak to each other, it is so important.

The prophecy of the elderly is fulfilled when the light of the Gospel enters fully into their lives; when, like Simeon and Anne, they take Jesus in their arms and announce the *revolution of tenderness*, the Good News of He Who came into the world to bring the light of the Father. That is why I ask you not to spare yourselves in proclaiming the Gospel to grandparents and elders. Go to them with a smile on your face and the Gospel in your hands. Go out into the streets of your parishes and seek out the elderly who live alone. Old age is not an illness, it is a privilege! Loneliness can be an illness, but with charity, closeness and spiritual comfort we can heal it.

God has a large population of grandparents throughout the world. Nowadays, in secularized societies in many countries, current generations of parents do not have, for the most part, the Christian formation and living faith that grandparents can pass on to their grandchildren. They are the indispensable link in educating children and young people in the faith. We must get used to including them in our pastoral horizons and to considering them, in a non-episodic way, as one of the vital components of our communities. They are not only people whom we are called to assist and protect to guard their lives, but they can be actors in a pastoral evangelizing ministry, privileged witnesses of God's faithful love.

For this I thank you all who dedicate your pastoral energies to grandparents and the elderly. I know well that your commitment and your reflection are born of concrete friendship with many elderly people. I hope that what is today the sensitivity of the few will become the patrimony of every ecclesial community. Do not be afraid, take initiatives, help your bishops and your dioceses to promote pastoral service to and with older people. Do not be

discouraged, keep going! The Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life will continue to accompany you in this task.

I too accompany you with my prayer and my blessing. And please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you!
