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Press Conference to present the first World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly, and the Message prepared by the Holy Father for the occasion

At 11.30 this morning, a press conference was live-streamed from the Holy See Press Office to present the first World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly, and the Message prepared by the Holy Father for the occasion. The Day will be held on the fourth Sunday of July – this year on 25 July – on the theme “I am with you always” (Mt 28: 20).

The speakers were His Eminence Cardinal Kevin Farrell, prefect of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life; Dr. Vittorio Scelzo, head of pastoral care of the elderly of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life; Ms. Monique Bodhuin, president of *Vie Montante Internationale*, via live link from Strasbourg, France; Ms. Maria Sofia Soli, “Viva gli anziani” of the Sant’Egidio Community; and Ms. Elena Liotta, “Giovani per la pace”, of the Sant’Egidio Community.

The following are their interventions:

Intervention by His Eminence Cardinal Kevin Farrell

The *World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly* is a celebration. We really needed it: after such a difficult year we truly need to celebrate, grandparents and grandchildren, young and old. “We should celebrate and rejoice” says the Father in the parable. A new page opens after dramatic months of difficulty. Pope Francis invites us to take a step further, he speaks to us of tenderness. Tenderness towards the elderly is needed because, as the Holy Father recalls in the message we present to you today, the Virus “has been much harsher with them”. For this reason, the Pope hopes that an angel will visit, and will come down to console them in their solitude, and he imagines that this angel looks like a young person who visits an elderly person.

On the other hand, the *Day* also speaks to us of the tenderness that grandparents show towards their grandchildren, of the solid guide that the elderly can be for many disoriented children, especially in a time like the one we are living in, in which personal interaction has become rare.

Tenderness is not just a private feeling, one that soothes wounds, but a way of relating to others, which should also be experienced in public. We have become accustomed to living alone, to not hugging each other, to considering the other as a threat to our health. Our societies, the Pope tells us in *Fratelli Tutti* (*All Brothers*), are now fragmented.

Tenderness can become a way of life, which stems from the heart, from the gaze of compassion, and is converted into thoughts and actions imbued with authentic charity. "I am with you always" - the theme of the Day that we are about to celebrate - is the promise that each one of us has received from the Lord and that each one of us is called to repeat to his brothers and sisters.

Tenderness has a social value, affirmed in the Celebration of this Day. It is a remedy we all need and our elderly are those who can provide it. In a frayed and hardened society emerging from the pandemic, not only is there a need for vaccines and economic recovery (albeit fundamental), but also for relearning the art of relationships. In this, grandparents and the elderly can be our teachers. This is also why they are so important.

The message we present today is both loving and demanding towards grandparents and the elderly. The Holy Father addresses them with affectionate words, but also announces to them the call to "a renewed vocation in a crucial time in history". There are three elements that characterize this call: "dreams, memory and prayer". The Lord's closeness - says the Pope - will give the strength even to the most fragile among us to embark upon a new path, along the paths of dreams, memory and prayer". However, what appears to be most relevant is not so much how this vocation is declined, rather the fact that they are considered the recipients of a specific call.

In the Church, grandparents and the elderly have a place of honor, and the *Day* we celebrate intends to reaffirm this. In pastoral care, each of our communities is invited to not consider the elderly as customers of our social services, rather to consider them as the protagonists of our programs and to enhance their spirituality. Putting grandparents and the elderly at the center, grasping the value of their presence is also the only true alternative to a throwaway culture. The opposite of waste is not only the works of charity (albeit necessary), but pastoral attention, in the awareness of the value they represent for families, the Church and society.

Now I would like to focus on a theme dear to the Holy Father: the wisdom of the elderly. Insisting on wisdom does not stem from the idea that elderly people are endowed with greater wisdom than others, rather they have an experiential wisdom – the wisdom of many years of life.

The elderly are a great resource for getting out of a crisis, better and not worse. This is above all to help us understand that what we are experiencing is not the first crisis, nor will it be the last, and that the story of mankind is placed in a history that transcends them. In the message, the Pope tells every elderly person that "it is necessary that you too bear witness that it is possible to come out renewed from a trial experience" and he cites, as an example, the experience of war, through which so many have lived.

Not disdaining the older generation means not being overwhelmed by the present. The obstacles we experience today and that seem insurmountable acquire the right proportions when viewed in the long-term perspective. It is in this sense that the experience of the elderly can help young people: help them to understand their own life in a more detached and realistic manner, with the carefulness necessary for making good choices. How many times has a grandparent helped a grandchild understand that a seemingly great disappointment is just a new path that the Lord is pointing to.

Similarly, shouldn't knowing that the Church was born from the experience of generations of Christians, who preceded and nourished us with their faith, lead us to understand that the crises we experience are only steps along the journey of a people throughout history? Pope Francis dedicated some important passages of "*Fratelli Tutti*" precisely to the need to not lose historical awareness, valuing grandparents, who are the voice and presence of this awareness.

I hope that the *World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly* helps us to grow in our love for the elderly and to discover them as teachers of tenderness, guardians over our roots and dispensers of wisdom. For our part, the

whole Church repeats to every grandparent and to every elder: “we will be with you always”, until the end of time.

Intervention by Dr. Vittorio Scelzo

I would like to give you some information on the progress regarding the first *World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly*, which will be celebrated this year for the first time on July 25, and illustrate the material that our Dicastery has made available starting from today. Starting at 12.00, on the website www.amorisaetitia.va you will find the Holy Father’s message for the *Day*, both in video and in a simple printable version to give to the elderly; there will also be a prayer written for the occasion, some pastoral suggestions on how to celebrate the *Day*, a liturgical aid and a collection of the Holy Father’s words on the elderly.

From the very beginning, we imagined a *Day* as wide-spread as possible to deliver the message to every grandparent and every elderly person, even to those most lonely. This year, we are also aware that many will still be unable to attend any type of public assembly due to the restrictions prompted by the pandemic. Moreover, even in places, such as Italy, where the health situation is improving and allow people to go to church, many elderly people are still scared or unable to do so.

For this reason, the *Day* will be an opportunity to experience a Church that goes forth. Let’s imagine grandchildren who deliver the Holy Father’s message to their grandparents and that the children of our parishes and our ecclesial communities go out and go look for the elderly who live alone in their neighborhoods to tell them “I am with you always”. It is no coincidence that the message was signed by the Holy Father on the day of the Visitation. That Gospel passage manifestly describes the evolution of the *Day*: a young woman who quickly goes to visit an elderly relative to show her she cares and help her concretely.

Joachim, Jesus’ grandfather, who lived on the outskirts of town, also received a visit from an angel who told him that his prayer had been heard (this is the image we have chosen as the logo). Angels exist and our young people can become angels if they help the elderly to get out of isolation. The Pope describes loneliness as an obstacle, but we know that big obstacles can be overcome.

This is a gesture rooted in Christian tradition - so much so that two of the works of mercy are visits: one to the sick and one to prisoners - which today takes on further meaning. For over a year, meeting together has been nearly impossible. Going to see an elderly person alone is a way to regain a minimum of normality and to resist the idea that loneliness is one’s destiny. Clearly, we invite everyone to strictly respect the health provisions of each individual country, but in many places today meeting - with due caution - is possible, and we must not get used to the idea that being away from each other is normal.

During a grandchild’s visit to their grandparents and young people’s visits to elderly people who are alone, they can deliver the Pope’s message or listen to the video. They can pray reciting the prayer prepared for the *Day*, and they can give them a flower or a small gift.

In Rome, on 25 July at 10.00, the Holy Father will celebrate a mass with the grandparents and the elderly of his diocese. A small number of people will participate, in compliance with the health provisions that will be in force at that time. Likewise, each diocese and each parish could dedicate one of the Sunday masses to the celebration of the *Day*. We suggest involving as many grandparents and elderly people as possible in person, so that their presence is a manifest sign of the importance they have in the community. Similarly - in the days before and after July 25th - Eucharistic celebrations or prayers can be organized in hospitals or homes for the elderly. Our desire is that all grandparents and all the elderly really participate in the *Day*.

The way in which each diocese or community will celebrate the *Day* will probably - and hopefully - be quite different and adapted to the pastoral needs of each context. In places where there is already a tradition in this

sense, we invite you to keep it. A suggestion that we feel we can give is to dedicate a particular memory to the elderly who have died from Coronavirus. We all know how many people there were who left us without it being possible to even celebrate their funeral. A memory - perhaps by reading their names and lighting a candle - could be a precious gesture of reconciliation for every small community.

A little over a month separates us from the *Day*, a rather short time to start organizing the celebration. In a few days we will publish the video of the prayer recited by the Holy Father together with elders from all over the world (among them there is also the oldest bishop in the world who is 101 years old). In these days we will launch a social campaign and invite everyone - especially the younger people - to tell about the visits and initiatives that will develop using the hashtag #IamWithYouAlways.

Intervention by Ms. Monique Bodhuin

I am very grateful to Cardinal Farrell for the honour he has bestowed on me by inviting me to speak here on behalf of *Vie Montante Internationale* (VMI), a Catholic action movement with some forty thousand members spread over all the continents and whose mission is based on three pillars: friendship, spirituality and social engagement.

This First World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly is a beautiful event. I thank the Cardinal and his team for having organised it. It is a first that cannot be without follow-up.

The Holy Father's message gives the meaning and the tone of this day. We can draw guidelines from it, and its content is a source of beautiful great hope for all older people.

The quotation from Matthew that opens the Holy Father's message, "I am with you always", is like a declaration of great tenderness. This closeness to the Lord to which Matthew's words refer can be expressed in the daily life of the elderly by a few simple gestures or instances. It is the child's hand that they hold and that gives them the confidence to walk, it is the joy of children's laughter that brightens up their loneliness and breaks the silence of the passing hours. It is up to each of us to find ways of expressing the affectionate presence and sincere tenderness that the elderly need to nourish their desire to live.

This desire to live has been undermined for more than a year by the pandemic. Long before the Covid-19 virus turned the world upside down, Pope Francis never missed an opportunity to tell the Church and the world that caring for the elderly is the duty of every man and woman worthy of the name. He maintains that a civilisation that neglects its elders is a lost civilisation... The elderly have paid a heavy price for the pandemic. Those living alone have experienced moments of increased solitude, very restrictive measures in care institutions, in nursing homes and rest homes, and this has taken from their desire to live. What can we say about the suffering of those who were hospitalised and not allowed visits and who then died alone and abandoned. How can our conscience as Christians not be challenged by these situations?

With this *First World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly*, we want to tell grandparents and the elderly that they have a central place in our hearts and more, and that they are recognised by the Church community as an integral part. This event invites us to be the bearers of this message of closeness and to play the role of angels -- the Greek word *annguelos*, from which it derives, means "one who proclaims". We will be those angels on that day, aware that we are called to continue to do so for weeks in order to give this day its full meaning.

I find, in the Holy Father's words, the objectives of the international congress organised in Rome at the end of January 2020 under the title "The Richness of Years". This Congress was underpinned by some powerful ideas: to recognise the charisms of old age, to give older people a full place in the ecclesial community together with the younger generations. They are entitled to this by virtue of their human experience which brought them both joys and hardships suffered and overcome, as well as their life of faith.

The words of the Holy Father emphasise the importance of the intergenerational link. Likewise, the *Year of the Family*, which began on 19 March, invites us to implement this dimension, since grandparents are part of the family. Grandparents play a crucial role in the family, any family, as witnesses of life for the younger generations. It is based on their heritage, on the memories they carry, on their life experience, all of which helps them to understand what is essential, on their “knowing how to be”, and on their relationship with Christ who gives meaning to their lives. It is on this intergenerational link, between grandparents and grandchildren, but also more widely, between young people and the elderly, that the MCR, *Mouvement Chrétien des Retraités*, the French branch of VMI, has designed the celebration on 25 July. I will just say a few words about it. It is called “Time for a snack” with the slogan “young and not so young, let’s share our dreams and let’s build the world of tomorrow”. This project has given rise to a partnership between VMI and the MCR and will be officially launched on 6 July in Taizé, in the presence of Brother Alois, in which I will participate.

This event must not allow us forget those who could not participate in the celebration of the Day. We must go to them, to those people who are alone and particularly in need of our presence. We can read with them the message of the Holy Father and recite with them the prayer of the Holy Father which refers to the unfailing presence of the Lord in their everyday lives. This is a way of inserting these isolated elderly people into the pastoral community and recognising their dignity as beloved sons and daughters of God. And we must not stop there...

For me, this first celebration of grandparents and the elderly is a starting point as it carries with it a dimension of openness to the future. In order to be faithful to our mission as baptized people, “we must always set out on a journey, but above all we must leave ourselves, in order to undertake something new”, as the Holy Father writes. This “something new” could be:

- training opportunities on the art of being grandparents or simply elderly people: the challenge is to be authentic “transmitters and awakeners of faith”;
- transversal ways in which the elderly and young people will meet to exchange in truth on the “art of being” to which the elderly can bear witness, but also with the desire on the part of each young person to build this alliance between young people and the elderly, as Pope Francis is calling for.

I will conclude by quoting the Holy Father, because these few words are rich in hope for the future and give direction: “Who better than the young to take the dreams of the elderly and transform them into reality. But in order to do this, we must continue to dream”.

Intervention by Ms. Maria Sofia Soli

First of all, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to give my testimony as an older person here today. My special thanks go to Pope Francis because he decided to dedicate this special World Day to all the elderly and to grandparents. It is a time of pandemic to which many of us have succumbed, often in solitude and without the comfort of a hug. There was no last goodbye or the consolation of a blessing at a funeral ceremony.

Today, when this darkness seems to be receding, we too strongly feel the need to make our contribution so as not to “waste this crisis”. We must try to direct humanity towards a better future with less selfishness and conflict and more fellowship. Yes, the future. The elderly do not only look to the past. Neither fatigue nor frailty can prevent us from dreaming for the sake of our grandchildren and for the generations to come. At no point can we turn back the wheel or think only of ourselves. Every age group has a need to express a vision for others. Every age group has its vocation. It is wonderful how Pope Francis stated this so clearly in his message: “to safeguard the heritage, to transmit the faith to the young and to care for the little ones”. “A renewed vocation for you too”, the Pope added, “at a crucial time in history”.

This invitation – and I say this with conviction – demands a change from us older people who often believe, sometimes stubbornly, that we can no longer change, that we are now what we are, and that we are no longer useful to anyone. At my age, I feel useful helping elderly people who are lonely and keeping them company, even if only with a phone call. We can often let ourselves fall into melancholy, resentment and sadness. Some time ago the Pope himself told us: “I recommend that you talk to young people, but not to give them a tongue-lashing, no: to listen to them, and then to plant some idea. This kind of dialogue is the future!”

It hurts us older people to be told that what is given to us – resources, attention, care – is taken away from the young. This is not and cannot be the case. Our grandchildren are part of us. They are our extension into the future, they are the life that does not end, and they are our truly great wealth. How sad the world can be when it separates generations and does not let them live together. How we suffered because of this during the pandemic! It is also for this reason that we do not like to be confined in nursing homes and retirement homes where visits, when permitted, are planned; where shows of affection are restricted; where we feel excluded from life.

We want to honour our generation by planting, with all the energy we have left, the three pillars Pope Francis talks about in his message: dreams, memory and prayer. While the world around us seems to be shrinking, it is good to expand the gaze of our hearts with our dreams, and to pass them on to those who will come after us, knowing that without memory there is no future. Memory is not an end in itself and it does not make us prisoners of the past. As the Pope says, it is the foundation of a house under construction.

And finally, prayer. Scripture, which Pope Francis recommended that we read and meditate, sustains our faith. The Lord “does not neglect the plea of the orphan, nor the widow, when she gives vent to her lament. The one who comes to her aid is received with kindness and their prayer reaches right up to the clouds”. As older people we can also learn to pray differently. Prayer for us older people can be our service to others. Not only for those I know and who are close to me, but also for the sick, for prisoners, and for the victims of misery and war. Prayer can be the best way to travel and reach many places in the world. Olivier Clément, a theologian I got to know through the Community of Sant’Egidio, wrote: “A civilisation where people no longer pray is a civilisation where old age has no meaning. And this is terrifying: we need old people who pray, because that is what old age is for”. The prayer of those of us who are older and grandparents, expresses a maternal feeling towards others who lead a more active life than we do. It is like saying: “My thoughts are with you. I accompany you with my remembrance and prayers...”.

Thank you for your attention.

Intervention by Ms. Elena Liotta

My name is Elena. The first time I was invited to visit elderly women in an institution in the centre of Rome I had just started secondary school. I can say that I received the grace of friendship with the elderly from a very young age. I discovered an unknown and fascinating world even though it can seem so far away: we walk at different speeds as we feel we are at the beginning and they feel they are at the end. And yet, in my friendship with them I have found a treasure: the need and the joy of stopping and listening; the beauty of a real encounter, not mediated by the detachment imposed by social media. I have learned to walk together with those who are more frail, to adjust my pace without any haste to pursue commitments and opportunities that in the end leave you unsatisfied and with a feeling of emptiness inside. In a world that idolises money and personal success as a measure of well-being, I have learned to value every moment spent together with those who love you. In long conversations with them I discovered my roots, what Rome was like before I was born, the hard work of a generation that rebuilt Italy as they sacrificed their time to give me and many children and grandchildren a better future. The elderly are History in our midst.

These months of the pandemic have been very difficult: for the elderly who have suffered loneliness, especially for the elderly in institutions who have been kept in forced isolation for too long; but also for us who love them,

who feel like their adopted grandchildren, almost like John who became Mary's son under the cross. Certainly, video calls and many new technologies have helped us not to forget faces and voices, to have news, to make our affection felt, but they have not been able to replace the beauty, the joy and the immediacy of the visits. Loneliness hurts everyone, but for the elderly it can be lethal. During these months of pandemic, I have often thought about the condition of the elderly in institutions, confined to their beds, between the fear of falling ill and the anguish of isolation. The first time we met up with some of them, it took them several minutes to recognise me. So, with patience, we reconstructed the story of our friendship, the circumstances of our first meeting, the things we did together before Covid-19 changed our lives, such as the weekly prayer meeting, the walks in the centre of Rome. We recognised and found each other through the memory of a friendship built up over the years. To see them again after more than eight months was an immense joy and a true resurrection.

We can emerge from the pandemic better people, as the Pope often reminds us. But for us young people this means taking the responsibility to break out of our self-centredness and egotism and to build networks and links between generations. The alliance between young and old is a grace not only for those who experience it, but also for an entire society infected with presentism who are incapable of visions of the future because they have no memory, like seeds falling on rocky and unproductive ground. Without memory, when the present seems dark and devoid of hopeful prospects, it is difficult to imagine the future and to dream. Without memory, storms seem gigantic and impossible to overcome. The alliance between young and old is a great resource for weathering storms and dreaming of a different future, a better future for all.
