SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
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General Audience

This morning's general audience took place in Saint Peter's Square, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world.

In his address in Italian, the Pope continued his cycle of catechesis on old age, focusing on the theme: "*Eleazar, the consistency of faith, legacy of honour*" (Bible reading: *2 Mac* 6: 18, 23-25).

After summarizing his catechesis in various languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the groups of faithful in attendance.

The general audience concluded with the recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the apostolic blessing.

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

On the path of these catecheses on old age, today we meet a biblical figure – and old man – named Eleazar, who lived at the time of the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes. He is a wonderful character. His character gives us a testimony of the special relationship that exists between the fidelity of old age and the honour of faith. He's a proud one, eh? I would like to speak precisely about the honour of faith, not only about faith's consistency, proclamation, and resistance. The honour of faith periodically comes under pressure, even violent pressure, from the culture of the rulers, who seek to debase it by treating it as an archaeological find, or an old superstition, an anachronistic fetish, and so on.

The biblical story – we have heard a short passage, but it is good to read it all – tells of the episode of the Jews being forced by a king's decree to eat meat sacrificed to idols. When it's the turn of Eleazar, an elderly man highly respected by everyone, in his nineties; highly respected by everyone – an authority – the king's officials

advised him to resort to a pretence, that is, to pretend to eat the meat without actually doing so. Hypocrisy. Religious hypocrisy. There is so much! There is so much religious hypocrisy, clerical hypocrisy, there is so much. These people tell him, “Be a little bit of a hypocrite, no one will notice. In this way Eleazar would be saved, and – they said – in the name of friendship he would accept their gesture of compassion and affection. A hypocritical way out. After all, they insisted, it was a small gesture, pretending to eat but not eating, an insignificant gesture.

It is a little thing, but Eleazar’s calm and firm response is based on an argument that strikes us. The central point is this: dishonouring the faith in old age, in order to gain a handful of days, cannot be compared with the legacy it must leave to the young, for entire generations to come. But well-done Eleazar! An old man who has lived in the coherence of his faith for a whole lifetime, and who now adapts himself to feigning repudiation of it, condemns the new generation to thinking that the whole faith has been a sham, an outer covering that can be abandoned, imagining that it can be preserved interiorly. And it is not so, says Eleazar. Such behaviour does not honour faith, not even before God. And the effect of this external trivialization will be devastating for the inner life of young people. But the consistency of this man who considers the young! He considers his future legacy, he thinks of his people.

It is precisely old age – and this is beautiful for all you old people, isn’t it! – that appears here as the decisive place, the irreplaceable place for this testimony. An elderly person who, because of his vulnerability, accepts that the practice of the faith is irrelevant, would make young people believe that faith has no real relationship with life. It would appear to them, from the outset, as a set of behaviours which, if necessary, can be faked or concealed, because none of them is particularly important for life.

The ancient heterodox “gnosis,” which was a very powerful and very seductive trap for early Christianity, theorised precisely about this, this is an old thing: that faith is a spirituality, not a practice; a strength of the mind, not a form of life. Faithfulness and the honour of faith, according to this heresy, have nothing to do with the behaviours of life, the institutions of the community, the symbols of the body. Nothing to do with it. The seduction of this perspective is strong, because it interprets, in its own way, an indisputable truth: that faith can never be reduced to a set of dietary rules or social practices. Faith is something else. The trouble is that the Gnostic radicalisation of this truth nullifies the realism of the Christian faith, because the Christian faith is realistic. The Christian faith is not just saying the creed: it is thinking about the Creed and understanding the Creed and doing the Creed. Working with our hands. Instead, this gnostic proposal pretends, but [imagines] that the important thing is that you have an interior spirituality, and then you can do whatever you please. And this is not Christian. It is the first heresy of the gnostics, which is very fashionable at the moment, in so many centres of spirituality and so on. It makes void the witness of this people, which shows the concrete signs of God in the life of the community and resists the perversions of the mind through the gestures of the body.

The gnostic temptation, which is one of the – let us use the word – heresies, one of the religious deviations of this time; the gnostic temptation remains ever present. In many trends in our society and culture, the practice of faith suffers from a negative portrayal, sometimes in the form of cultural irony, sometimes with covert marginalization. The practice of faith for these gnostics, who were already around at the time of Jesus, is regarded as a useless and even harmful external, as an antiquated residue, as a disguised superstition. In short, something for old men. The pressure that this indiscriminate criticism exerts on the younger generations is strong. Of course, we know that the practice of faith can become a soulless external practice. This is the other danger, the opposite, isn’t it? And it’s true, isn’t it? But in itself it’s not so. Perhaps it is for us older people – and there are still some here – to give faith back its honour, to make it coherent, which is the witness of Eleazar: consistency to the very end. The practice of faith is not the symbol of our weakness, no, but rather the sign of its strength. We are no longer youngsters. We were not kidding around when we set out on the Lord’s path!

Faith deserves respect and honour to the very end: it has changed our lives, it has purified our minds, it has taught us the worship of God and the love of our neighbour. It is a blessing for all! But the faith as a whole, not just a part of it. Like Eleazar, we will not barter our faith for a handful of quiet days. We will show, in all humility and firmness, precisely in our old age, that believing is not something “for the old.” No. It’s a matter of life. Believing in the Holy Spirit, who makes all things new, and He will gladly help us.

Dear elderly brothers and sisters – not to say old, we are in the same group – please look at the young people: they are watching us. They are watching us. Don't forget that. I am reminded of that wonderful post-war film: *The Children Are Watching Us*. We can say the same thing with young people: young people are watching us and our consistency can open up a beautiful path of life for them. Hypocrisy, on the other hand, will do so much harm. Let us pray for one another. May God bless all of us old people. Thank you.

Greeting in English

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially those from England, Norway, Canada and the United States of America. I also welcome the members of the various ecumenical and interreligious groups present. In the joy of the Risen Christ I invoke upon you and your families the loving mercy of God our Father. May the Lord bless you!