



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 27 April 2022

[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Old Age - 7. Naomi, the alliance between the generations that opens up the future

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

Today we will continue to reflect on the elderly, on grandparents, on old age – the word seems ugly but no, the elderly are great, they are beautiful! And today we will let ourselves be inspired by the splendid book of Ruth, a jewel of the Bible. The parable of Ruth sheds light on the beauty of family bonds: generated by the relationship of a couple, but which go beyond it. Bonds of love capable of being equally strong, in which the perfection of that polyhedron of fundamental affections that make up the family grammar of love shines. This grammar brings vital lymph and generative wisdom to the set of relationships that build up the community. With regard to the Canticle of Canticles, the Book of Ruth is like the other panel in the diptych of nuptial love. Just as important, just as essential, it indeed celebrates the power and the poetry that must inhabit the bonds of generation, kinship, devotion and fidelity that involve the entire family constellation. And which even become capable, in the dramatic conjunctures in the life of a couple, of bringing an unimaginable power of love, able to relaunch hope and the future.

We know that clichés about the bonds of kinship created by marriage, especially that of the mother-in-law, the relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law, speak against this perspective. But, precisely for this reason, the word of God becomes precious. The inspiration of faith can open up a horizon of witness that counters the most common prejudices, a horizon that is

precious for the entire human community. I invite you to rediscover the book of Ruth! Especially in the meditation on love and in catechesis on the family.

This short book also contains valuable teaching on the alliance of the generations: where youth reveals itself to be capable of restoring enthusiasm to mature age – this is essential: when youth restores enthusiasm to the elderly – and where old age discovers it is capable of reopening the future to wounded youth. At the beginning, the elderly Naomi, although moved by the affection of her daughters-in-law, widowed by her two sons, is pessimistic with regard to their destiny within a population that is not their own. She therefore affectionately encourages the young women to return to their families to rebuild their lives – these widows were young. She says, “I can do nothing for you”. This already appears to be an act of love: the elderly woman, without a husband and without her sons, insists that her daughters-in-law abandon her. However, it is also a sort of resignation: there is no possible future for the foreign widows, without the protection of a husband. Ruth knows this, and resists this generous offer – she does not want to go home. The bond established between mother- and daughter-in-law was blessed by God: Naomi cannot ask to be abandoned. At first, Naomi appears more resigned than happy about this offer: perhaps she thinks that this strange bond will aggravate the risk for both of them. In some cases, the tendency of the elderly towards pessimism needs to be countered by the affectionate pressure of the young.

Indeed, Naomi, moved by Ruth’s devotion, will emerge from her pessimism and even take the initiative, opening up a new future for Ruth. She instructs and encourages Ruth, her son’s widow, to win a new husband in Israel. Boaz, the candidate, shows his nobility, defending Ruth from the men in his employ. Unfortunately, this is a risk that still exists today.

Ruth’s new marriage is celebrated and the worlds are again pacified. The women of Israel tell Naomi that Ruth, the foreigner, is worth “more than seven sons” and that the marriage will be a “blessing of the Lord”. Naomi, who was full of bitterness and even said that her name was bitterness, in her old age, will know the joy of having a part in the generation of a new birth. Look how many “miracles” accompany the conversion of this elderly woman! She converts to the commitment of making herself available, with love, for the future of a generation wounded by loss and at risk of abandonment. The points of reconstruction are those that, on the basis of the probability drawn by commonplace prejudices, ought to generate insuperable fractures. Instead, faith and love enable them to be overcome: the mother-in-law overcomes her jealousy for her own son, loving Ruth’s new bond; the women of Israel overcome their distrust of the foreigner (and if women will do it, everyone will); the vulnerability of the lone girl, faced with male power, is reconciled with a bond full of love and respect.

And all this because the young Ruth is obstinate in her fidelity to a bond exposed to ethnic and religious prejudice. And I return to what I said at the beginning – today the mother-in-law is a mythical figure: I won’t say that we think of the mother-in-law as the devil but she is always thought of as an unpleasant figure. But the mother-in-law is the mother of your husband, she is the

mother of your wife. Let us think today about this rather widespread feeling that the farther away the mother-in-law is, the better. No! She is a mother, she is elderly. One of the most beautiful things about grandmothers is seeing the grandchildren – when their children have children of their own, they come alive again. Look closely at the relationship you have with your mothers-in-law: at times they are a bit special, but they have been the mother to your spouse, they have given you everything. We should at least make them happy, so that they go forth into their old age with joy. And if they have some fault, we should help them to correct it. And to you, mothers-in-law, I say: be careful with your tongue, because its misuse is one of the worst sins of mothers-in-law. Be careful.

And Ruth, in this book, accepts her mother-in-law and makes her come alive again, and the elderly Naomi takes the initiative of reopening the future for Ruth, instead of limiting herself to enjoying her support. If the young open themselves to gratitude for what they have received, and the elderly take the initiative of relaunching their future, nothing can stop the flourishing of God's blessings among peoples! Do not forget, may young people speak with their grandparents, may the young speak with the old, may the old speak with the young. This bridge must be rebuilt in a strong way – there is a current of salvation, of happiness there. May the Lord help us, doing this, to grow in harmony with families, that constructive harmony that goes from the oldest to the youngest, that beautiful bridge that we must protect and safeguard.

Special Greetings:

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially those from England, Denmark and the United States of America. 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!

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on the meaning and value of old age, in the light of God's word, we now reflect on the figure of the widow Naomi as presented in the biblical Book of Ruth. This short yet beautiful story speaks of the relationship of love and mutual support between the elderly Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth. Naomi, dwelling in a foreign land, is left alone when her two sons die. Despite her grief, she encourages her two daughters-in-law to remain among their own people as she returns to Bethlehem, her native town. Ruth chooses not to abandon her beloved mother-in-law, and accompanies her to Judah, telling her: "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (1:16). Ruth's love supports Naomi, and Naomi in turn helps Ruth to find a new husband, Boaz. God blesses this marriage with a son,

Obed, who was the father of Jesse, the father of David. The story of these two faithful women shows us that, in God's providential plan, the covenant of love and fidelity uniting the generations can prove immensely enriching for our families and for the growth of a society that respects the dignity and gifts of each of its members, however young or old.