



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

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[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Old Age: 9. Judith. Admirable in youth, a generous in old age

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we will talk about Judith, a biblical heroine. The conclusion of the book that bears her name — we have listened to a passage from it — summarizes the final part of the life of this woman, who defended Israel from its enemies. Judith is a young and virtuous Jewish widow who, thanks to her faith, beauty and cunning, saved the city of Bethulia and the people of Judah from the siege of Holofernes, general of Nebuchadnezzar king of Assyria, an overbearing and contemptuous enemy of God. And so, with her astute way of acting, she was able to slit the throat of the dictator who came against the country. She was brave, this woman. She had faith.

After the great adventure in which she was the protagonist, Judith returned to live in her town, Bethulia, where she lived her old age beautifully, until she was 105. The time of old age had come for her, as it does for many people: sometimes after an intense life of work, sometimes after an adventurous existence, or one of great dedication. Heroism does not consist only of the great events that fall under the spotlight, such as that of Judith, who killed the dictator. Heroism is often found in the tenacity of love poured out in a difficult family and on behalf of a threatened community.

Judith lived for more than 100 years, a special blessing. But it is not uncommon today to live

many years after the season of retirement. How should we interpret this? How should we make the most of this time we have? I will retire today, and will have many years ahead of me, and what can I do, in these years? How can I grow — in age, that goes without saying; but how can I grow in authority, in holiness, in wisdom?

For many people, the prospect of retirement coincides with that of a deserved and long-awaited rest from demanding and wearisome activities. But it also happens that the end of work can be a source for worry, and is accompanied with some trepidation. “What will I do, now that my life will be emptied of what filled it for so long”? This is the question. Daily work also means a set of relationships, the satisfaction of earning a living, the experience of having a role, well-deserved recognition, a time that is full that goes beyond working hours alone.

Certainly, there is the joyful and tiring task of looking after grandchildren, and grandparents today have a very important role in the family in helping to raise grandchildren; but we know that ever fewer children are born nowadays, and parents are often farther away, more subject to moving around, with unfavourable work and housing conditions. At times they are also more reluctant to leave room to grandparents for education, granting only what is strictly linked to the need for assistance. But someone said to me, with an ironic smile, “Nowadays, in this socio-economic situation, grandparents have become more important because they have a pension”. There are new demands, also within the area of educational and family relations, that require us to reshape the traditional alliance between the generations.

But, let us ask ourselves: are we making this effort to “reshape”? Or do we simply suffer the inertia of material and economic conditions? The co-presence of generations is, in fact, lengthening. Are we all trying together to make these conditions more human, more loving, more just, in the new conditions of modern societies? For grandparents, an important part of their vocation is to support their sons and daughters in the upbringing of their children. The little ones learn the power of tenderness and respect for frailty: irreplaceable lessons that, are easier to impart and receive with grandparents. For their part, grandparents learn that tenderness and frailty are not solely signs of decline: for young people, they are conditions that humanize the future.

Judith was soon widowed and had no children, but, as an old woman, she was able to live *a season of fullness and serenity*, in the knowledge that she had lived to the fullest the mission the Lord had entrusted to her. It was time for her to leave the good legacy of wisdom, tenderness, and gifts for her family and her community: *a legacy of goodness and not only of goods*. When we think of a legacy, at times we think of *goods*, and not of the *goodness* that is done in old age, and that has been sown, that *goodness* that is the best legacy we can leave.

It was precisely in her old age that Judith “granted freedom to her favourite handmaid”. This is a sign of an attentive and humane approach to those who had been close to her. This maid had accompanied her at the moment of that adventure, to win over the dictator and to cut his throat.

When we are old, we lose some of our sight, but our inner gaze becomes more penetrating — one sees with the heart. We become capable of seeing things that had previously escaped us. The elderly know how to look, and they know how to see... It is true: the Lord does not entrust his talents only to the young and the strong. He has talents for everyone, made to fit each person, the elderly too. The life of our communities must know how to benefit from the talents and charisms of so many elderly people who are already retired, but who are a wealth to be treasured. On the part of the elderly themselves, this requires a creative attention, a new attention, a generous availability. The previous skills of active life lose their constraint and become resources to be given away: teaching, advising, building, caring, listening ... preferably in favour of the most disadvantaged who cannot afford any learning or who are abandoned in their loneliness.

Judith freed her maid and showered everyone with attention. As a young woman, she had won the esteem of the community with her courage. As an old woman, she garnered esteem because of the tenderness with which she enriched their freedom and affections. Judith is not a pensioner who lives her emptiness in melancholy. She is a passionate elderly woman who fills the time God gives her with gifts. Remember: one of these days, take the Bible and look at the Book of Judith: it is very short, it is easy to read. It is ten pages long, no more. Read this story of a courageous woman who ends up this way, with tenderness, generosity, a worthy woman. And this is how I would like all our grandmothers to be. All like this: courageous, wise, and who bequeath to us not money, but the legacy of wisdom, sown in their grandchildren.

Special Greetings:

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially those from the United Kingdom, Sweden 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!

I address a special thought to the people of Sri Lanka, especially the young, who in recent times have made their cry heard in the face of the challenges and the social and economic problems of the country. I join with religious leaders in urging all sides involved to maintain a peaceful approach, without giving in to violence. I appeal to all those with responsibility to listen to the aspirations of the people, guaranteeing the full respect of human rights and civil liberties.

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *the sick*, to *young people* and to *newlyweds*. During this month, dedicated especially to Our Lady, I invite you to follow the example of Mary, trusting in her maternal intercession, surrendering with confidence in the Lord's hands, sustained by She who remained faithful beneath the Cross at Calvary.

And I apologize because I will not be able to come among you to greet you because of my knee. It

is still unwell. You will have to walk a bit towards me, but it is the same and I receive you with my heart in hands, Thank you

I offer my blessing to all of 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 turn to the biblical heroine Judith. As a young woman, Judith had saved her people by slaying the Assyrian general Holofernes. The Scriptures tell us that after this victory she returned home and spent the rest of her life with her family. Judith can serve as an example for all those older people who, in retirement, find themselves adjusting to a new chapter of life and new opportunities for personal growth. Like Judith, who, at the end of her days, divided her inheritance and set her maidservant free, the elderly can be teachers of the young in the fundamental social virtues of generosity and attentive concern for the needs of others. In old age too, God asks us to employ our talents wisely for the good of our families and of society as a whole. As was Judith, may we be remembered not only for the accomplishments of our youth, but also for the creativity and passion with which we continue to bear good fruit in every season of life.