



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 1st June 2022

[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Old Age: 12. "*Forsake me not when my strength is spent*" (Ps 71:9)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The beautiful prayer of the elderly man that we find in Psalm 71, which we listened to, encourages us to meditate on the strong tension that dwells in the condition of old age, when the memory of labours overcome and blessings received is put to the test of faith and hope.

The trial already presents itself in the weakness that accompanies the transition through the frailty and vulnerability of advanced age. And the Psalmist — an elderly man who addresses the Lord — explicitly mentions the fact that this process becomes an opportunity for abandonment, deception and prevarication and arrogance, which at times prey upon the elderly. A form of cowardice in which we are specializing in our society. It is true! In this throwaway society, this throwaway culture, elderly people are cast aside and suffer these things. Indeed, there is no lack of those who take advantage of the age of the elderly, to cheat them and intimidate them in myriad ways. Often, we read in the newspapers or hear news of elderly people who are unscrupulously tricked out of their savings, or are left without protection or abandoned without care; or offended by forms of contempt and intimidated to renounce their rights. Such cruelty also occurs within families — and this is serious, but it happens in families too. Rejected elderly people, abandoned in rest homes, without their children going to visit them, or if they do, they visit a few times a year. The elderly person is placed in the corner of existence. And this happens: it happens today, it happens in

families, it happens all the time. We must reflect on this.

The whole of society must hasten to take care of its elderly — they are its treasure! — who are increasingly numerous and often also more abandoned. When we hear of elderly people who are dispossessed of their autonomy, of their security, even their home, we understand that the *ambivalence of today's society* with regard to old age is not a problem of occasional emergencies, but a feature of that throwaway culture that poisons the world we live in. The elder of the Psalm confides his discouragement to God: “My enemies speak concerning me”, he says. “Those who watch for my life consult together / and say, ‘God has forsaken him; / pursue and seize him / for there is none to deliver him’” (vv. 10-11).

The consequences are fatal. Old age not only loses its dignity, but it even doubts that it deserves to continue. In this way, we are all tempted to hide our vulnerability, to hide our illness, our age and our seniority, because we fear that they are the precursor to our loss of dignity. Let us ask ourselves: is it human to induce this feeling? Why is modern civilization, so advanced and efficient, so uncomfortable with sickness and old age? Why does it hide illness, hide old age? And why is politics, which appears to be so committed to defining the limits of a dignified survival, at the same time insensitive to the dignity of a loving coexistence with the old and the sick?

The elder of the Psalm we have heard, this elderly man who sees his old age as a defeat, rediscovers *trust in the Lord*. He feels the need to be helped. And he turns to God. Saint Augustine, commenting on this Psalm, exhorts the elderly: “Fear not, that you be cast away in that weakness, in that old age. ... Why do you fear lest He should forsake you, lest He cast you away for the time of old age, when your strength shall have failed? Yea at that time in you will be the strength of Him, when your strength shall have failed” (*Expositions on the Psalms* 36, 881-882). And the elderly Psalmist invokes: “Deliver me and rescue me, /incline thy ear to me, and save me. / Be thou to me a rock of refuge, / a strong fortress, to save me, / for thou art my rock and my fortress” (vv. 2-3). The invocation testifies to God’s faithfulness and involves his ability to rouse consciences that have been diverted by insensitivity to the span of mortal life, which must be protected in its entirety. He again prays thus: “O God, be not far from me; / O my God, make haste to help me! / May my accusers be put to shame and consumed; / with scorn and disgrace may they be covered / who seek my hurt” (vv. 12-13).

Indeed, shame should fall on those who take advantage of the weakness of illness and old age. Prayer renews in the elder’s heart the promise of God’s faithfulness and his blessing. *The elderly man rediscovers prayer and bears witness to its strength*. In the Gospels, Jesus never rejects the prayer of those who are in need of help. By virtue of their weakness, the elderly can teach those who are living in other ages of life that we all need to abandon ourselves to the Lord, to invoke his help. In this sense, we must all learn from old age: yes, there is a gift in being elderly, understood as abandoning oneself to the care of others, starting with God himself.

There is then a “*magisterium of frailty*”. Do not hide frailties, no. It is true, they are real and there is a magisterium of frailty, which old age is able to remind us of in a credible way for the whole span of human life. Do not hide old age, do not hide the frailty of old age. This is a teaching for all of us. This teaching opens up a decisive horizon for the reform of our own civilization. A reform that is now indispensable for the benefit of the coexistence of all. The marginalization of the elderly — both conceptual and practical — corrupts all seasons of life, not just that of old age. Every one of us can think today of the elderly people in your family: how do I relate to them, do I remember them, do I visit them? Do I try to make sure they lack nothing? Do I respect them? The elderly in my family: mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, aunts and uncles, friends Have I deleted them from my life? Or do I go to them to obtain wisdom, the wisdom of life? Remember that you too will become elderly. Old age comes for everyone. And treat the elderly today as you would wish to be treated in your old age. They are the memory of the family, the memory of humanity, the memory of the country. Protect the elderly, who are wisdom. May the Lord grant the elderly who are part of the Church the generosity of this invocation and of this provocation. May this trust in the Lord spread to us. And this, for the good of all, theirs, ours and our children’s.

Special Greetings:

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s Audience, especially those from England and the United States of America. I offer a special greeting to the many student groups present. As we prepare to celebrate the Solemnity of Pentecost, I invoke upon you and your families an abundant outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord bless you!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *the sick*, to *young people* and to *newlyweds*. Next Sunday, we will celebrate the Solemnity of Pentecost. May the Holy Spirit be for you, young people, like “wind and fire” to protect you from lethargy, and stir you towards the love of lofty ideals and to commitment to the Church and to society. May he be for you, elderly people and the sick, the “Consoler” who accompanies you in your daily struggle, giving you the certainty of God’s love. May he be for you newlyweds, a source of “communion” that will make you grow in mutual love.

I offer my blessing to all of you!

APPEAL

The blocking of grain exports from Ukraine, on which the lives of millions of people depend, especially in the poorest countries, is of great concern. I make a heartfelt appeal that every effort be made to resolve this issue and to guarantee the universal human right to food. Please do not

use wheat, a staple food, as a weapon of war!

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 consider the heartfelt prayer found in the first verses of Psalm 71: "You, O Lord, are my hope; my trust, O Lord, from my youth" (v. 5). Sensing the growing frailty and vulnerability that come with the passing of the years, the Psalmist implores God's continued protection and care. In our own day, his anxious concern is shared by many of the elderly, who see their dignity and even their rights threatened by the spread of a "throwaway culture" that views them as useless and indeed a burden to society. In the face of this sense of frailty and uncertainty, the Psalmist reaffirms his trust in God's covenant fidelity and his provident care. In every generation, the elderly can offer us a much-needed example of such perseverance in prayer and hope-filled surrender to the Lord. By their presence and example, they can open minds and hearts, and inspire the building of a more just and humane society – one that respects all the stages of life and values the contribution of each of its members to the common good.
