



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II AT THE WORLD ASSEMBLY ON THE PROBLEMS OF AGING POPULATION*

Already on a number of occasions the Holy See has greeted with considerable interest and hope the initiative of the United Nations to promote a World Assembly on the problems of the aging population and of its consequences for each person and for society. Once that decision was confirmed, one witnessed a development and a deepening of the awareness of this demographic phenomenon of our times which obliges the nations and international society to question themselves concerning the destiny, the needs, the rights, the specific capacity of the aging generations whose number is increasing. Even beyond persons, this reflection must extend to the very organization of society with regard to this group of the population.

The attentive study of the preparatory work of this World Assembly and of the Plan of Action, at present submitted to the examination of all the member Nations of the United Nations, allows one to see a number of points which encounter a particular support on the part of the Holy See. I will quote some: the attention brought to elderly people as such and to the quality of their lives today; respect for their right to live as active members of a society which they have helped to build; the will to foster a social organization in which each generation can bring its contribution in line with the others; finally an appeal to the creativity of each socio-cultural milieu, so that they can find satisfying responses which enable the elderly to carry out activities which correspond to their great diversity of origin and education, of capacities and of experience, of cultures and of belief. The themes already mentioned are sufficient to indicate that we are not dealing here simply with abstract or technical problems, but much more with the destiny of human persons, with their particular personal history characterized by family roots, social links, professional successes or failures which have marked, or which still mark, their existence.

To your important Assembly, oriented as it is towards these realities in order to deepen them and to find concrete and balanced solutions, the Church wishes to offer the contribution of its reflection, of its experience and of its faith in man. Practically speaking, it wishes to propose its human and Christian vision of aging, its conviction concerning the family and of institutions of family type as the most favourable place for the development of the elderly and to sustain, through its interest, contemporary society in the service of the aging generations.

1. I recall with great emotion my meeting with the elderly in November 1980 in Munich Cathedral. I underlined on that occasion that human aging is a natural stage of existence, which generally must be considered its crowning. This vision presupposes obviously that old age - when one arrives at it - is considered as an element having a particular value within human life considered as a whole. It also requires an exact concept of the person who is, at the same time, body and soul. It is in this perspective that the Bible speaks of old age and of the elderly with respect and admiration. The book of Ecclesiasticus, for example, after praising "judgment in grey-haired men" (25:4-6) begins a long panegyric of the ancestors whose "bodies were buried in peace, and whose name lives to all generations" (cf. chap. 44 to 51). And the New Testament is full of veneration for the elderly. Saint Luke, with great emotion, presents the image of the elderly Simeon and the prophetess Anna who receive Christ in the temple. And, in the era of the early Christian communities, we find the Apostles designating Elders to watch over their young foundations. The Church earnestly hopes that the Plan of Action will be open to this conception of old age considered not only as an inexorable process of biological degradation or as a period detached from the other seasons of existence, but rather as a phase which is capable of natural development of the life of the entire human being, for whom it represents fulfillment.

It is indeed true that life is a gift of God to men, created through love in His image and likeness. This understanding of the sacred dignity of the human person leads one to attribute a value to all the stages of life. It is a question of coherence and justice. It is, in effect, impossible to appreciate in truth the life of an old person without appreciating in truth the life of an infant at the beginning of its conception. It is impossible to know at what point one will arrive if life is not any more respected as an inalienable and sacred good. One must firmly affirm with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its Declaration on Euthanasia of 5 May 1980 that «no person may authorize the suppression of the life of an innocent human being, fetus or embryo, child or adult, old person, incurably sick or dying... It is a violation of the Divine Law, an offence against the dignity of the human person, a crime against life, an attempt against humanity». It is very opportune to add further what the same Declaration says of the use of therapeutic means: "It is today very important, at the moment of death, to protect the dignity of the human person and the Christian conception of life against the application of technical advances which risk becoming abusive". Death is a part of our human horizon and gives it its true and mysterious dimension. The contemporary world, especially in the West, needs to learn to reintegrate death into human life. Who could not augur for others and desire for himself to accept and assume the final act of his earthly existence in the dignity and serenity that is certainly possible for believers?

I wish now to look once again with you at the characteristics of old age. On the one hand, they are sad and difficult to accept, especially for the person who is alone. On the other hand there are characteristics which are a source of wealth for oneself and for others. Taken together they form part of the human experience of those who are old today and of those who will be old tomorrow.

The fundamental aspects of the third and of the fourth age are linked naturally with a certain frailty of the physical forces, with a reduced vivacity of the spiritual faculties, with a progressive separation from the activities to which one was attached, with sickness and with an incapacity which overcomes one, with the perspective of affective separations linked with death. These saddening characteristics can be transformed through philosophical convictions and, above all for those who have the good fortune to believe, through the certitude of faith. For believers, in fact, the final stage of earthly life can be seen as a mysterious accompaniment of Christ the Redeemer, along the dolorous path of the Cross, leading to the radiant dawn of Easter. But in a more general sense one can affirm that the manner in which a civilization copes

with old age and with death as a constitutive element of life, and the manner in which it helps its elderly members to live their death, are decisive criteria of the respect it bears for man.

There are also positive aspects of old age. It is the time in which men and women can gather the harvest of the experience of their entire lives, making the choice between what is accidental and essential, and achieving a level of great witness and of profound serenity. It is the period of life in which they dispose of a great deal of time, even of all their time, to love their habitual or occasional companions with a disinterest, a patience and a discreet joy of which the elderly act as admirable examples. For believers, further, it offers the happy possibility to meditate on the splendours of the faith and to pray in a deeper manner.

The fecundity of these values and their survival are linked with two conditions which cannot be dissociated. The first requires that the elderly themselves deeply accept their age and appreciate its possible resources. The second condition refers to today's society. It must become capable of recognizing the moral, affective and religious values which exist in the spirit and in the heart of the elderly and it must be open to the integration into our society which suffers through a disturbing gap between its technical and ethical levels. The elderly, in fact, can live only with difficulty in a world which has become unaware of its spiritual dimension. They arrive at a point in which they disregard themselves, in that they see that it is the productivity of citizens which seems to count most, while the other resources of the human person are ignored or undervalued. Such a climate goes against the fulfillment and the fecundity of old age and necessarily engenders a turning in on self, the sad feeling of being useless and finally despair. But one must underline once again that it is society as a whole which deprives itself of enriching and guiding elements when it begins to consider as valid for its development only its young or adult members in full possession of their strength and when it considers the others as unproductive, even though numerous experiences, judiciously carried out, prove the contrary.

II - In my Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* I recalled, in the light of the divine origins of the human family, that its essence and its tasks are defined by love: "Established as 'an intimate community of life and love' the family ...has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love.... All the members of the family, each according to his or her own gift, have the grace and responsibility of building, day by day, the communion of persons, making the family 'a school of deeper humanity'" (nn. 17 and 21) .

Allow me to look at the possibilities that are offered through the family to old people, both with regard to the faithful support which they have the right to expect from the family and with regard to the possible contribution which they can make to its life and mission. It is quite true that the conditions necessary for the integration of the elderly into the home of their children or other relatives do not always exist and that such integration occasionally reveals itself as impossible. On such occasions, then, one must envisage another solution, with the responsibility for the children and the other members of the family to maintain warm and regular bonds with the one who has had to go to a home for the elderly.

Having said this, it is also certain that, living with their own flesh and blood, the elderly can, with the appropriateness and the discretion that this will always require, bring to their relatives the benefit of that affection and wisdom, that understanding and indulgence, of advice and comfort, of faith and of prayer which are, for the most part, the charisma of the twilight of life. Living in this manner they will equally contribute to giving their due place, especially by example, to attitudes which are often undervalued today, like listening, self-effacement, serenity, self-giving, interiority, discreet and

radiant joy ... it is worth noting also that the habitual or occasional presence of the elderly among their own relatives is often a precious factor in the linking and mutual understanding between the generations, which are necessarily diverse and complementary. Indeed this strengthening of the family, along the lines that I have just recalled, and according to its possible manner, can be a source of balance and of vitality, of humanity and of spirituality for that fundamental cell of all society which bears the most expressive name which exists in all the languages of the world: "the family".

With the current demographic evolution, society sees opening before itself a new field of action in the service of the human person in order to guarantee for the elderly the place that belongs to them in the civil community and to foster their specific contribution to its development.

The aging generations who, in certain legislative and social systems, see themselves retiring earlier and earlier from the area of economic production, ask themselves - often with anguish - about the place and function that is reserved for them in this new type of society. How does this early retirement which is imposed on them help them themselves? Does current society in its evolution and orientations still expect something from aged and retired members?

III - It appears that, faced with this new and vast problem, society as a whole, and particularly those who bear responsibility, must envisage solutions capable of responding to the aspirations of aged persons. These solutions cannot be of one single type. If it is normal that society should foster the maintenance of the elderly with their family and their own environment, as long as this solution is possible and can be supported, other means must also be offered to the third and fourth age. In this domain a society which is truly aware of its duties towards those generations who have contributed to making the history of nations must set up appropriate institutions. To maintain continuity with that which the elderly have known and experienced, it is most desirable that these institutions have a family character; that is to say, that they try to provide the elderly with human warmth, so necessary at any stage of life but particularly for the stage of advanced age. These institutions must equally provide for a certain autonomy, compatible with necessities of community life, as well as possible activities which correspond to their physical and professional capacities.

Finally these institutions must care for all the needs of an age which advances. Certainly, there already exist institutions of this kind. But they must be developed. You will permit me, on this subject, to call to mind the charitable action of the Church through so many institutions dedicated to the care of the elderly, for such a long time. May they be congratulated and encouraged! A society brings to itself singular honour when it makes these paths of service for man converge in what is best in respect for the elderly and for the varying institutions which receive them. It seems useful to me to draw attention briefly, once again, to some of the new services which society could render to retired persons and to the elderly to assure them a place and a role in the human community. I think, for example, of the permanent practical formation in many countries which generates, for those who benefit from it, not only personal enrichment, but also capacities of adaptation and of participation in the daily life of society. Truly, the elderly possess reserves of wisdom and experience which, maintained and at the same time completed by a well-adapted process of permanent formation, could be inserted into those lively sectors of education to humble socio-charitable services. On this level new initiatives could be sought with the interest of the elderly themselves or with the associations which represent them. I equally think that society should seek, in taking careful account of the individual capacities of the elderly and of the strongly varying situations in the different continents, to establish a possibility of a certain diversification of activities. Between boring uniformity and continuous fantasy, it is possible to find a judicious balance between professional and other work, between reading and

study, leisure, organized or individual encounters with other persons and other milieux, a time for serene and prayerful meditation.

There is another service which society can render to the aging generations. It is that of encouraging the creation, when this is called for, of associations for the elderly and of supporting those which already exist. They already are bearing fruit, especially combating isolation and the painful impression of being rendered useless which often pervade the stage of retirement and old age. Such associations need to be recognized by those with responsibility in society as a legitimate expression of the desires of the elderly and, among them, the desires of the most marginated.

Finally, I think of the role which the means of social communication and particularly of television and radio can and should play in order to create a more just and renewed image of aging, and its possible contribution to the vitality and balance of society.

This requires that those responsible for audio-visual means and for the press must be convinced, or at least respectful, of a conception of human life founded no longer only on economic or purely material utility but on its fuller sense which can admit of development and an admirable expansion until the end of the earthly course, especially when the environment favours such a possibility.

At the conclusion of these reflections and suggestions, it remains for me to express the hope that the Vienna World Assembly on the problems of aging will progressively bring about abundant and enduring fruit. In this domain, as in many others already studied and fostered by the United Nations, e.g. childhood, the world of the handicapped, etc., we are dealing with questions which touch the ultimate realities of the present and future of human civilization. All culture, in whatever continent or country and for the entire era of history, cannot find its value and its radiance except in always assigning primacy to the integral development of the human person, of the first and final stage of his earthly course, and this encounters the temptation of a society taken up with the dizziness of the production of things and of their consumption. May those who are responsible for the world today open themselves unitedly for the true advancement and maintenance of their people in this manner. This is not only the object of my ardent wishes but also of my constant prayer to God, the Author of all good things.

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