



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT IN AUSTRALIA

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE ELDERLY**

Perth (Australia), 30 November 1986

"We do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day".

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

1. In coming to visit the elderly at "Glendalough", I am pleased to find a real home for the aged in the care of the Little Sisters of the Poor. And today, from this home I wish to express my deep affection for all the older members of Australian society in every corner of this land: those who are living in homes such as this; the many who are living with relatives or friends; those who live alone, especially if they are sick, disabled or infirm. To each one of you I offer my warm good wishes for your well-being and happiness, and I express the hope that as your physical energies diminish with age as must be in our earthly pilgrimage your inner spiritual resources will increase and be renewed day by day.

You know that wherever I go I enjoy being with the young, that they inspire me by their enthusiasm. But I also want you to know that I experience great happiness when I am with the aged. You give me a share in your peace and in the accumulated wisdom of your lives.

2. Let us live this moment together in a spirit of thanksgiving to God for the lives he has given us. You can look back on lives rich in memories. Many of you have your children and your children's children to be proud of. Perhaps some of you remember times of pain and the hopes that never quite materialized. But all of us – to use the words of the First Letter of Saint John – "know and believe the love God has for us". Yes, God has loved and continues to love each one of you in a deep and personal way. If you think back, you will see that your whole life is a story of God's love coming upon you in successive stages. Life itself is a gift of the Father's love, as was your

baptism, your Christian faith and the presence of the Holy Spirit down through the years. For all these gifts we sing a hymn of gratitude to God: "Blessed be the Lord who has shown me the wonders of his love".

3. My brothers and sisters: many of you are an inspiration because of your patience in waiting for the Lord to come and because of your confident faith that he will take you to himself. You remember his promise, and you are convinced that it applies also to you: "There are many rooms in my Father's house... I am going now to prepare a place for you: so that where I am you may be too".

All of us who have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ know that our death will not be totally different from the rest of our earthly journey. It too will be God's love coming upon us, but God's love in its transforming fullness.

4. Still, no matter what our age, all of us must try to use to the full the time that still remains to us.

There are those who believe that after a certain age there are no further challenges to face, that no further growth is possible. Each one of you knows that this is not true. Learning to grow old requires wisdom and courage. The experience of ageing is one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living. Yet it is an experience that is touching more and more people in our time. In Australia, over the next thirty years, it is expected that the number of people over sixty-five will double. Society focuses on the economic and political implications of this increasing population of the elderly. But it is up to us, as Christians, to remind the world of the precious experience and the wisdom, vision and spiritual energies of the elderly.

5. The spirituality of ageing has its own unique challenges and invitations.

Among the most important of these is the call to reconciliation that confronts the elderly in the evening of life. As you look back on your lives you may remember sufferings and personal failures. It is important to think about these experiences, so as to see them in the light of the whole of life's journey. You may realize that some events which caused you suffering also brought you many blessings. Perhaps they gave you special opportunities for doing good that would not otherwise have been a part of the pattern of your lives.

As Christians we should offer our memories to the Lord. Thinking about the past will not alter the reality of your sufferings or disappointments, but it can change the way you look at them. Younger people cannot fully understand the way in which the elderly sometimes return to the distant past, but such reflection has its place. And when it is done in prayer it can be a source of healing.

6. I am speaking of the important spiritual healing that restores inner freedom to the elderly. This kind of healing is gained through an awareness and appreciation of the ways in which God works

through human weakness as well as through human virtue. Even the memory of our sins does not discourage us any longer, because we realize that God's mercy is greater than our sins and that God's pardon is a proof of his faithful love for us. Jesus – the Way, the Truth and the Life- takes upon himself our human weaknesses and failings and in return offers us redemption, forgiveness and peace.

The promise of resurrection enables the aged to see all of life in a totally different way.

In whatever way you are called to suffer, I urge you to take courage from the words of Saint Paul: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us... the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves... groan inwardly, as we await... the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved".

In the healing process which should accompany old age, the Sacrament of Penance plays an important part. In this sacrament, reconciliation with God, with the Church and with others becomes a deeply spiritual experience. It is an experience that can and should be renewed at regular intervals. In this sacrament you come into direct contact with Christ's mercy and his loving pardon. And here I appeal to priests to remember how important this ministry is for the sick and the aged.

Then too there is the Sacrament of the Sick, which benefits both soul and body. The Church asks that through the anointing with oil and the prayer of faith our sins be forgiven, that the remnants of sin be taken away and that the increase of grace be accompanied by an improvement of health, if God so wishes if for our good. I hope that you will approach this sacrament with confidence. The Church makes this sacrament available to the elderly not only when they are gravely ill but also when the weakness of ageing weighs them down. When I was in hospital five years ago I myself derived much comfort from it.

7. The ageing experience brings with it a new attitude to time. You now have the opportunity to appreciate each moment of life. It becomes possible for you to stop and admire and be grateful for the ordinary things of life, things which perhaps you overlooked before: the little things like human companionship and solidarity, and the beauty of the world that tells us about the infinitely greater beauty of the Creator. All of these offer new possibilities for contemplative prayer, a prayer not only of words but above all of trusting abandonment into God's hands. You can be drawn to realize that, while life itself is a gift, your own particular life is God's special gift to you and your gift in return to God. God's immensity and mystery penetrate your life in unexpected ways, and you are invited into greater union with God. You have many opportunities to raise your minds and hearts to God in prayer, and for this you should thank him.

While old age brings with it the challenge to look back to the past, it is also a time of responsibility

for the future. It is an invitation to take a new interest in life, to enter into a new relationship with the world. The elderly do not usually take part in social and political activity, but you still can contribute a great deal to making the world a better place. You have experience to share, wisdom to impart, tolerance to teach, though these are not always evident to younger people. Your words of peace and love are greatly needed in today's society. Above all it is through your life of prayer – at times accompanied by suffering – that you will help bring the redeeming love of Christ to the world.

You are able to teach the young that it is important to value life in itself and for itself. You invite other age groups to realize that feverish activity is not the measure of a useful life. Your ability to cherish life for its own sake, in spite of a lessening energy and mobility, challenges others to reflect not only on the value of doing but on the value of being. Your lives are directed towards the Kingdom of heaven, and this challenges those whose interests are all bound up with the passing world. As you gradually detach yourselves from certain possessions, you help others to reflect on their own relationship to material things. In this way your lives can be an eloquent witness to the essential values taught by Christ.

8. As we grow older we become more dependent. We are blessed indeed if, in our later years, we find others to take an interest in us and help us. This is the beautiful and meritorious work carried out by so many, inside the family, or for an aged friend, or in hospitals and in homes like this. It is the work done by many religious. And they are joined by devoted lay workers. All who care for their older brothers and sisters are serving Christ. Theirs is a wonderful vocation and an impressive testimony of Christian charity.

To all of you who care for the elderly I wish to say a final word of recommendation and encouragement. Yours is not a service that is limited to physical and material things. You have the precious task of helping the older members of the community to turn their later years into a time of fulfilment and completion. It is a time when they should integrate the joys and sorrows, hopes and anxieties of life – which the elderly feel in a particularly sensitive way – into a vision of life in which they acknowledge God's providence and rely totally on his mercy and love. For this reason you must always approach your task with love and respect, which you must renew daily in the certainty that Christ repeats to you those words in the Gospel: "you did it to me". In serving the old you are bearing clear witness to your beliefs:

- belief in the dignity of the human person;
- belief that life in Christ is the most important of all realities;
- belief in the life that reaches beyond time to eternal happiness in union with our loving God.

Your work therefore is an enterprise of human solidarity and of evangelical love. Your loving care is a precious help to the old. Your clear witness is a help and encouragement to us all.

9. Whoever in Australia is taking care of an ageing parent or relative, or, as a religious or lay person, is serving the aged in a hospital or home such as this: I ask you in the name of the greatest of all the commandments, which is love, to continue your work with new conviction and fresh dedication.

I pray that Australians will always honour the old and show them special affection: I pray that public policy will always be based on absolute respect for their dignity and their inalienable rights. And to young Australians I say: look at the treasure of humanity and wisdom that is yours in your old folk! Love them and be grateful to them!

Jesus said to his disciples: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you". I can wish no greater blessing upon you, my elder brothers and sisters, than the peace of Christ. May peace be the atmosphere in which you pass your days and may it be firmly established in your souls. May you be able to share your peace with all those around you.

Remember always that Jesus has given us his Mother Mary to be our Mother too. She is close to us every day of our pilgrimage to heaven. You will find joy and strength when you ask Mary's help, especially when you pray to her using that beautiful prayer which is the Rosary. She is the Queen of heaven and she awaits us all with her Son. At the time determined by God she will welcome us to our eternal home, where together with the angels and saints we shall for ever praise the Most Holy Trinity: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

And now as a token of our spiritual union in Christ and his Church, I gladly impart to you all my special Apostolic Blessing.

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