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General Audience

This morning's General Audience took place in Saint Peter's Square, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world.

In his address in Italian, the Pope continued his cycle of catechesis on old age, focusing on the theme: "The joyful service of faith that is learned in gratitude" (Bible reading: *Mk* 1: 29-31).

After summarizing his catechesis in various languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the groups of faithful in attendance.

The General Audience concluded with the recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the apostolic blessing.

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We have listened to the simple and touching account of the healing of the mother-in-law of Simon – who is not yet called Peter – in Mark's version of the Gospel. The brief episode is related, with slight yet evocative variations, also in the other two synoptic Gospels. "Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever", writes Mark. We do not know if it is a mild ailment, but in old age even a simple fever can be dangerous. When you are old, you are no longer in control of your body. One has to learn to choose what to do and what not to do. The vigour of the body fails and abandons us, even though our heart does not stop yearning. One must then learn to purify desire: be patient, choose what to ask of the body and of life. When we are old, we cannot do the same things we did when we were young: the body has another pace, and we must listen to the body and accept its limits. We all have them. I too have to use a walking stick now.

Illness weighs on the elderly in a new and different way compared to when one is young or an adult. It is like a

hard blow that falls in an already difficult time. In the elderly, illness seems to hasten death and, in any case, diminish that time we have to live, which we already consider short. The doubt lurks that we will not recover, that “this time it will be the last time I get sick...”, and so on: these ideas come. One cannot dream of hope in a future that now appears non-existent. A renowned Italian writer, Italo Calvino, noted the bitterness of the old who suffer the loss of the things of the past, more than they enjoy the coming of the new. But the Gospel scene we have heard helps us to hope and already offers us a first lesson: Jesus does not visit that sick old woman by himself: he goes there together with the disciples. And this makes us think a bit.

It is precisely the *Christian community* that must take care of the elderly: relatives and friends, but the community. Visiting the elderly must be done by many, together and often. We should never forget these three lines of the Gospel, especially now that the number of elderly people has grown considerably, also in relation to the young, since we are in this demographic winter, we have fewer children, and there are many old people and few young ones. We must feel a responsibility to visit the elderly who are often alone, and present them to the Lord with our prayers. Jesus himself will teach us how to love them. “A society truly welcomes life when it recognizes that it is also precious in old age, in disability, in serious illness and even when it is fading” (*Message to the Pontifical Academy for Life*, 19 February 2014). Life is always precious. Jesus, when he sees the sick elderly woman, takes her by the hand and heals her. The same gesture that he uses to revive that young girl who was dead: he takes her by the hand and heals her, putting her back on her feet. Jesus, with this tender gesture of love, gives the first lesson to the disciples: namely, salvation is announced or, better, communicated through attention to that sick person; and the woman’s faith shines in gratitude for the tenderness of God who stooped to her. I return to a theme I have repeated in these catecheses: this throwaway culture seems to cancel out the elderly. Yes, it does not kill them, but socially it eliminates them, as if they were a burden to carry: it is better to conceal them. This is a betrayal of our own humanity, this is the worst thing, this is choosing life according to utility, according to young and not with life as it is, with the wisdom of the elderly, with the limits of the elderly. The elderly have much to give us: there is the wisdom of life. There is much to teach us: this is why we must teach children that their grandparents are to be cared for and visited. The dialogue between young people and grandparents, children and grandparents, is fundamental for society, it is fundamental for the Church, it is fundamental for the health of life. Where there is no dialogue between the young and the old, something is lacking and a generation grows up without past, that is, without roots.

If the first lesson was given by Jesus, the second is given to us by the elderly woman, who arose and “served them”. Even in old age one can, or rather one must serve the community. It is good for the elderly to cultivate the responsibility to serve, overcoming the temptation to stand aside. The Lord does not reject them; on the contrary, he restores to them the strength to serve. And I like to note that there is no special emphasis in the account on the part of the evangelists: it is the normality of following, that the disciples will learn, in its fullness, along the path of formation they will experience in the school of Jesus. The elderly who retain the disposition for healing, consolation, intercession for their brothers and sisters – be they disciples, centurions, people disturbed by evil spirits, those who are rejected – are perhaps the highest testimony to the purity of this gratitude that accompanies faith. If the elderly, instead of being rejected and dismissed from the scene of the events that mark the life of the community, were placed at the centre of collective attention, they would be encouraged to exercise the valuable ministry of gratitude towards God, who forgets no-one. The gratitude of elderly people for the gifts received from God during their life, as Peter’s mother-in-law teaches us, restores to the community the joy of living together, and confers to the faith of the disciples the essential feature of its destination.

But we must learn well that the spirit of intercession and service, which Jesus prescribes to all his disciples, is not simply a matter for women: there is no trace of this limitation in Jesus’ words and gestures. The evangelical service of gratitude for God’s tenderness is not in any way written according to the grammar of the man who is master and the woman who serves. However, this does not detract from the fact that women, in the gratitude and tenderness of faith, can teach men things they find more difficult to understand. Peter’s mother-in-law, before the Apostles arrived, along the path of following Jesus, showed the way to them too. And the special gentleness of Jesus, who “took her by the hand” and “lifted her up”, clearly shows, from the very beginning, his special sensibility towards the weak and the sick, which the Son of God had certainly learned from his Mother. Please, let us make sure that the elderly, grandparents, are close to children, to the young, to hand down this memory of life, to pass on this experience of life, this wisdom of life. To the extent to which we ensure that the young and the old are connected, to this extent there will be more hope for the future of our society.

Greeting in English

I greet the English-speaking visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the various pilgrimage groups from the United States of America. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you!
