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Audience with participants in the meeting “The caress and the smile”, organized by the “Fondazione Età Grande”

This morning, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the grandparents, elderly and grandchildren who participated in the meeting “The caress and the smile” organized by the *Fondazione Età Grande* (“Great Age Foundation”).

The following is the address delivered by the Pope to those present during the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear grandparents and dear grandchildren, good morning and welcome!

I greet Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia and all those who have collaborated to organize this moment of celebration. And particular thanks go to the many showbusiness personalities who have wished to participate. Thank you! We all have a grandfather and a grandmother, two grandfathers, two grandmothers... it is a beautiful experience to have a grandparent! But even Italy has a grandfather! And for this reason, I want to greet the grandfather of Italy, who is present here.

It is good to welcome you here, grandparents and grandchildren, young and not so young. Today we see, as the Psalm says, how good it is to be together (cf. *Ps* 133). One only has to look at you to understand it, because there is love between you. And it is precisely on this that I would like us to reflect a moment: on the fact that love makes us better, love makes us better, it makes us richer and it makes us wiser, at any age. Love makes us better.

Firstly: love makes us *better*. You too show this, that you make each other better by loving each other. And I say this too you as a “grandfather”, with the desire to share the ever-youthful faith that unites all generations. I too received it from my grandmother, from whom I first learned about Jesus who loves us, who never leaves us

alone, and who urges us too to be close to each other and never to exclude anyone. I still remember the first prayers my grandmother taught me. It was from her that I heard the story of that family where there was the grandfather who, since he could not eat easily at the table and got dirty, had been sent away to eat alone. And it was not a good thing, my grandmother told me that story... It was not a good thing, on the contrary, it was very bad! And so, the grandson – so continues the story my grandmother told me – the grandson tinkered around for a few days with hammer and nails, and when his dad asked him what he was doing, he replied: “I’m building a table for you, so you can eat alone when you get old!” And my grandmother taught me this, and I have never forgotten this story. Do not forget it either, because it is only by being together with love, not excluding anyone, that one becomes better, one becomes more humane!

Not only this, but we also become *richer*. How is this? Our society is full of people who are specialists in many things, rich in knowledge and useful means for everyone. However, if there is no sharing and each person thinks only of himself, all that wealth is lost; rather, it becomes an impoverishment of humanity. And this is a great risk for our time: the poverty of fragmentation and selfishness. The selfish person thinks he is more important if he puts himself in the foreground and has more things, if he has more things... But the selfish person is the poorest, because selfishness impoverishes. Let us think, for example, of some expressions we use: when we talk about the “world of youth”, the “world of the elderly”, this world or another... But there is just one world! And it is made up of many realities that are different precisely in order to help and complement each other: the generations, the peoples, and all the differences, if harmonized, can reveal, like the faces of a big diamond, the wondrous splendour of humanity and creation. This too is what your being together teaches us: not to let diversity create rifts between us! No, let there not be rifts... Not to pulverize the diamond of love, the most beautiful treasure God has given us: love.

At times we hear phrases such as “think of yourself!”, that phrase “think of yourself”, “don’t need anyone!”. They are false phrases, which mislead people into thinking that it is good not to depend on others, to do things by yourself, to live as islands, whereas these are attitudes that only create a great deal of loneliness. Such as, for example, when because of the culture of rejection, the elderly are left alone and have to spend the last years of their life far from home and from their loved ones. What do you think about this? Is it good or is it not good? No! The elderly must not be left by themselves, they must live within the family, in the community, with the affection of everyone. And if they cannot live with their families, we must go to visit them and stay close to them. Let us think about it for a moment: do we like this? Isn’t a world in which no one has to be afraid to end their days alone much better? This world is sad, clearly yes, it is sad. So let us build this world, together, not just by devising care programmes, but by cultivating different projects of existence, in which the passing years are not considered a loss that diminishes someone, but an asset that grows and enriches everyone: and as such are appreciated and not feared.

And this brings us to the final aspect: love, the love that makes us *wiser*. It is curious: love makes us wiser. Dear grandchildren, your grandparents are the memory of a world without memory, and “when a community loses its memory, it’s over” (*Address to the Sant’Egidio Community*, 15 June 2014). A question: what happens to a society that loses its memory? (*The young people answer*) It’s over. We must not lose our memory. Listen to your grandparents, especially when they teach you, with their love and with their witness, to cultivate the most important affections, which are not obtained by force, which do not appear through success, but which fill life.

It is not a coincidence that it was two elderly people, I like to think two grandparents, Simeon and Anna, who recognized Jesus when he was taken to the Temple by Mary and Joseph (cf. *Lk 2:22-38*). It was these two grandparents who recognized Jesus, before everyone else. They welcomed Him, they took Him in their arms and they understood – only they understood – what was happening: that God was there, present, and that He was watching them through the eyes of a child. Do you understand? These two elderly people, look at them. Only they realized, seeing the infant Jesus, that the Messiah had come, the Saviour everyone was waiting for. It was the elderly who understood the Mystery.

Elderly people wear glasses – almost all of them – but they can see far. How come? They can see far, because they have lived for many years, and have many things to teach: for example, how bad war is. A long time ago, I learned this precisely from my grandfather, who had lived in 1914, at the Piave, the first World War, and through his stories he made me understand that war is a horrible thing, never to be done. He also taught me a beautiful

song, that I still remember. Do you want me to tell you? (*The young people say "Yes!"*). Think about it well, the soldiers at the Piave sang this: "General Cadorno wrote to the Queen, if you want to see Trieste, look at a postcard!". It is beautiful! The soldiers used to sing it.

Visit your grandparents and do not marginalize them, for your own good: "The marginalization of the elderly – both conceptual and practical – corrupts all seasons of life, not just that of old age" (*Catechesis*, 1 June 2022). And in the other diocese I used to visit rest homes for the elderly, and I always used to ask: "How many children do you have?" "Many, many!" "And do they come to visit you?" "Yes, always – I remember once – they always come". And when I left, the nurse would say to me, "How good that woman is, how she covers up for her children: they come twice a year, no more". Grandparents are generous: they know how to cover up bad things. Please, go to see your grandparents, do not marginalize them: it is for your own good. The marginalization of the elderly corrupts all the seasons of life, not just that of old age. I like to repeat this. Instead, you learn the wisdom of their strong love, and also of their frailty, which is a "magisterium" capable of teaching without the need for words, a true antidote to the hardening of the heart: it will help you not to remain stuck in the present, and to savour life as a relationship (cf. Benedict XVI, *Greeting in the family home 'Long Live the Elderly'*, 12 November 2012). But not only that: when you, grandparents and grandchildren, old and young, are together, when you see and hear each other often, when you care for each other, your love is a breath of clean air that refreshes the world and society and makes us all stronger, beyond the bonds of kinship.

It is the message, this is the message that Jesus gave us too, on the cross, when He "saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing near, [and] He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (*Jn 19:26-27*). With those words He entrusted to us a miracle to perform: that of loving us all as one great family.

Dear friends, thank you, thank you for being here, and thank you for what you are doing with the "*Età Grande*" Foundation! Together, united, you are an example and a gift to all. I remember you in prayer, I bless you, and please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you, thank you very much!
