



Holy See Press Hall - February 9, 2021 - H.E. Archbishop V. Paglia

First of all, allow me to thank Pope Francis for the institution of the "World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly" which will be celebrated every year on July 25 on the feast of Saints Joachim and Anna. That is an invitation to believers to grow in them and around them a new sensitivity and care towards grandparents and the elderly. Several times the last popes have spoken in order to draw everyone's attention to the elderly. Suffice it to recall the *Letter to the Elders* of Saint John Paul II, some precious speeches by Benedict XVI and the intense Magisterium of Pope Francis with the unforgettable feast of the elderly held in Rome in 2017. The Pope who never ceases to combat that "culture of waste" which leads to abandoning the elderly, urges us in every way to take care of the affective network that unites the generations, so that the family and the Christian community may be a welcoming home for everyone, from children to grandparents, and the transmission of culture and faith between generations may be flowing and alive.

With this Note, the Academy for Life intends to underline the urgency of a new attention to elderly people who in recent decades have increased in numbers everywhere. There hasn't been, however, an increased closeness to them or an adequate understanding of the great demographic revolution of these last decades. The COVID-19 pandemic – whose most numerous victims have been the elderly – has revealed this inability of contemporary society to take proper care of its elderly. With the pandemic, that "throwaway" culture that Pope Francis has repeatedly recalled has caused countless tragedies among the elderly. On all continents, the pandemic has primarily affected those who are old. The death tolls are brutal in their cruelty. To date, there is talk of more than two million and three hundred thousand elderly people who have died from Covid-19, the majority of whom were over 75. A real "massacre of the elderly". And the majority of them died in institutions for the elderly. Data from some countries - for example Italy - show that half of the elderly victims of Covid-19 came from institutions and residential care homes, while only 24 percent of overall deaths concern

the elderly who lived at home. In short, 50% of deaths occurred among the approximately 300,000 guests of nursing homes, while only 24% affected the 7 million elderly over 75 who lived at home. On equal terms, their home, even during the pandemic, protected them much more. And all this took place in Europe and in many other parts of the world. A research by Tel Aviv University on European countries has highlighted the direct proportional relationship between the number of beds in nursing homes and the number of elderly deaths. This proportion remains the same in each country: as the number of beds increases, the number of victims in the elderly population also increases. I don't think that's a coincidence. However, what happened prevents the question of caring for the elderly from being dismissed with the immediate search for scapegoats, for individual culprits. On the other hand, a guilty and suspicious silence would be incomprehensible.

It is necessary to globally rethink society's closeness to the elderly. Much needs to be reviewed in the care system for the elderly. The institutionalization of the elderly in nursing homes, in every country, has not necessarily guaranteed elderly people, especially those who are weaker, better conditions of care. A serious rethinking is needed not only in relation to residences for the elderly but for the entire care system of the numerous elderly population that today characterizes all societies. Pope Francis recalled that we won't emerge from the pandemic as we were before: either we will be better or we will be worse. That depends on us, on the way we start building our future today. This Note - the third issued by the Academy in relation to the pandemic - aims to help build a new future for the elderly in society.

It is the Church's responsibility to take on a prophetic vocation pointing to the dawn of a new time. We cannot fail to commit ourselves to a deep vision able to guide the care of the third and fourth age. We owe it to our elders, to all those who will become so in the years to come. The level of civilization of an era is measured by the way we treat those who are weaker and more fragile. The death and suffering of the oldest cannot fail to be a call to do better, to do differently, to do more. We owe it to our children, to those who are young and at the beginning of life: educating to the life of the Gospel also means teaching that weakness - even that of the elderly - is not a curse but a way to encounter God in the face of Jesus Christ. Through the eyes of the Gospel frailty can become a strength and an instrument of evangelization.

Within a new and evolving world, the Church, teacher of life, will have to increasingly reinterpret its vocation to be a role model and a beacon for many families and for society as a whole so that aging people are supported and helped in their stay at home and in any case they are never abandoned.

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