



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

POPE JOHN PAUL II

***TO an international conference on the elderly
sponsored by the
Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance
to Health-Care Workers***

Saturday, 31 October 1998

*Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. It is a pleasure to welcome all of you who are attending the international conference organized by the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers on a theme that is one of the traditional aspects of the Church's pastoral concern. I express my gratitude to those of you who dedicate your work to the complex problems facing the elderly, who are becoming ever more numerous in every society of the world.

I thank Archbishop Javier Lozano Barragán for his noble words expressing the sentiments you share. Your conference has wanted to address the problem with that respect for the elderly which shines brightly in Sacred Scripture when it shows us Abraham and Sara (cf. Gn 17:15-22), when it describes the welcome that Simeon and Anna gave Jesus (cf. Lk 2:23-38), when it calls priests elders (cf. Acts 14:23; 1 Tm 4:14; 5:17, 19; Tt 1:5; 1 Pt 5:1), when it sums up the homage of all creation in the adoration of the 24 elders (Rv 4:4), and finally when it describes God himself as “the Ancient One” (Dn 7:9-22).

2. Your studies emphasize how great and precious is human life, which retains its value in every age and every condition. They reaffirm with authority that Gospel of life which the Church, in faithfully contemplating the mystery of Redemption, acknowledges with ever renewed wonder and

feels called to proclaim to the people of all times (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 2).

The conference did not only deal with the demographic and medical-psychological aspects of the elderly, but also sought to examine the matter more closely by focusing its attention on what Revelation presents in this regard and comparing it with the reality that we experience. The Church's work over the centuries has also been emphasized in a historical-dynamic way, with useful and fitting suggestions for updating every charitable initiative, in responsible collaboration with the civil authorities.

3. Old age is *the third season of life*: life that is born, life that grows, life that comes to an end are the three stages in the mystery of existence, of that human life which “comes from God, is his gift, his image and imprint, a sharing in his breath of life” (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 39).

The Old Testament promises long life to human beings as the reward for fulfilling the law of God: “The fear of the Lord prolongs life” (Prov 10:27). It was the common belief that the prolonging of physical life until “good old age” (Gn 25:8), when a man could die “full of years” (Gn 25:8), should be considered a proof of particular goodwill on God's part. This value must also be given renewed attention in a society that very often seems to speak of old age only as a problem.

To devote attention to the complexity of the problems affecting the world of the elderly means, for the Church, to discern a “sign of the time” and to interpret it in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in a way suitable to each generation, she responds to the perennial human questions about the meaning of present and future life and their mutual relationship (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 4)

4. Our times are marked by *the fact that people are living longer*, which, together with the decline in fertility, has led to a considerable ageing of the world population.

For the first time in human history, society is faced with a profound upheaval in the population structure, forcing it to modify its charitable strategies, with repercussions at all levels. It is a question of new social planning and of reviewing society's economic structure, as well as one's vision of the life-cycle and the interaction between generations. It is a real challenge to society, whose justice is revealed by the extent to which it responds to the charitable needs of all its members: its degree of civilization is measured by the protection given to the weakest members of the social fabric.

5. Although often regarded as only the recipients of charitable aid, the elderly must also be called to participate in this work; over the years the elderly population can attain a greater maturity in the form of intelligence, balance and wisdom. For this reason Sirach advises: “Stand in the assembly of the elders. Who is wise? Cleave to him” (Sir 6:34); and again: “Do not disregard the discourse of the aged, for they themselves learned from their fathers; because from them you will gain understanding and learn how to give an answer in time of need” (Sir 8:9). It is clear that the elderly

should not be considered merely an object of concern, closeness and service. They too have a valuable contribution to make to life. Thanks to the wealth of experience they have acquired over the years, they can and must be sources of wisdom, witnesses of hope and love (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 94).

The family-elderly relationship must be seen as a relationship of giving and receiving. The elderly also give: their years of experience cannot be ignored. If this experience, as it can happen, is not in harmony with the changing times, their whole life can still become a source of so much guidance for their relatives, representing a continuation of the group spirit, of traditions, of professional choices, of religious beliefs, etc. We are all aware of the special relationship that exists between the elderly and children. Adults too, if they know how to create an atmosphere of esteem and affection around the elderly, can draw from their wisdom and discernment to make prudent decisions.

6. It is in this perspective that society must have a renewed awareness of *solidarity between generations*: a renewed awareness of the sense and meaning of old age in a culture only too dominated by the myth of productivity and physical capacity. We must allow the elderly to live with security and dignity, and their families must be helped, even economically, in order to continue being the natural place for intergenerational relations.

Further observations must also be made regarding social health care and rehabilitation, which often can be necessary. Advances in health-care technology prolong life, but do not necessarily improve its quality. It is necessary to develop charitable strategies that put a priority on the dignity of the elderly and that help them, as far as possible, to maintain a sense of self-esteem lest, feeling they are a useless burden, they eventually desire and ask for death (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 94).

7. Called to prophetic deeds in society, the Church defends life from its dawn to its conclusion in death. It is especially for this final stage, which often lasts for months and years and creates many serious problems, that I appeal today to the sensitivity of families, asking them to accompany their loved ones to the end of their earthly pilgrimage. How can we not recall the tender words of Scripture: "O son, help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives; even if his is lacking in understanding, show forbearance; in all your strength do not despise him. For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and ... in the day of your affliction it will be remembered in your favour" (Sir 3:12-15).

8. The respect that we owe the elderly compels me once again to raise my voice *against all those practices of shortening life* known as *euthanasia*.

In the presence of a secularized mentality that does not respect life, especially when it is weak, we must emphasize that it is a gift of God which are all obliged to protect. This duty particularly

concerns health-care workers, whose specific mission is to become “ministers of life” in all its stages, especially in those marked by weakness and illness.

“The temptation ... of euthanasia” appears as “one of the more alarming symptoms of the ‘culture of death’ which is advancing above all in prosperous societies” (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 64).

Euthanasia is an attack on life that no human authority can justify, because the life of an innocent person is an indispensable good.

9. Turning now to all the elderly of the world, I wish to say to them: dear brothers and sisters, do not lose heart: life does not end here on earth, but instead only starts here. We must be witnesses to the resurrection! Joy must be a characteristic of the elderly; a serene joy, because the time is coming and the reward that the Lord Jesus has prepared for his faithful servants is approaching. How can we not think of the touching words of the Apostle Paul? “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Tm 4:7-8).

With these sentiments I impart an affectionate Blessing to you, to your loved ones and especially to the elderly.

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