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# "Do you know how to waste time with the elderly?"

In his 2 March general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on the elderly, speaking about the need for dialogue between the different generations.

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*Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!*

In the Bible account of the genealogies, one is immediately

struck by their tremendous longevity: we are talking about centuries! When does old age begin here, we wonder? And what is the significance of the fact that these ancient fathers live so long after fathering their children? Fathers and sons live together for centuries! This passage of time in terms of centuries, narrated in a ritual style, confers a strong, very strong symbolic meaning to the relationship between longevity and genealogy.

It is as though the transmission of human life, so new in the created universe, demanded a slow and prolonged *initiation*. Everything is new, at the beginnings of the history of a creature who is spirit and life, conscience and freedom, sensibility and responsibility. The new life – human life – immersed in the tension between its origin “in the image and semblance” of God, and the fragility of his mortal condition, represents a

novelty to be discovered. And it requires a long initiation period, in which mutual support among generations is indispensable in order to decipher experiences and confront the enigmas of life. During this long time, the spiritual quality of man is also slowly cultivated.

In a certain sense, every passing epoch in human history offers this feeling again: it is as if we had to start over calmly from the beginning with our questions on the meaning of life, when the scenario of the human condition appears crowded with new experiences and hitherto unasked questions. Certainly, the accumulation of cultural memory increases the familiarity necessary to face new passages. The times of transmission are reduced, but the times of assimilation always require patience. The excess of speed, which by now obsesses every stage of our life, makes every experience more

superficial and less “nourishing”. Young people are unconscious victims of this split between the time on the clock, that needs to be rushed, and the times of life, that require a proper “leavening”. A long life enables these long times, and the damages of haste, to be experienced.

Old age certainly imposes a slower pace: but they are not merely times of inertia. Indeed, the measure of these rhythms opens up, for all, spaces of meaning of life unknown to the obsession with speed. Losing contact with the slower rhythms of old age closes up these spaces to everyone. It is from this perspective that I wished to establish the feast of grandparents, on the last Sunday of July. The alliance between the two extreme generations of life – children and the elderly – also helps the other two – young people and adults – to bond with each other so as to make

everyone's existence richer in humanity.

There is a need for dialogue between the generations: if there is no dialogue between young people and the elderly, if there is no dialogue, each generation remains isolated and cannot transmit the message. Think: a young person who is not bonded to his or her roots, which are the grandparents, does not receive the strength, like the tree, the strength of the roots, and grows up badly, grows up ailing, grows up without points of reference.

Therefore, it is necessary to seek, as a human need, dialogue between generations. And this dialogue is important between grandparents and grandchildren, who are the two extremes.

Let us imagine a city in which the co-existence of the different ages forms an integral part of the overall plan of

its habitat. Let us think about the formation of affectionate relations between old age and youth that irradiate out onto the overall style of relations. The overlapping of the generations would become a source of energy for a truly visible and livable humanism. The modern city tends to be hostile to the elderly (and, not by chance, also to children). This society, that has this spirit of rejection: it rejects so many unwanted children and it rejects the elderly. It casts them aside – they are no use – to rest homes, hospitals, there... The excess of speed puts us in a centrifuge that sweeps us away like confetti. One completely loses sight of the bigger picture. Each person holds on to his or her own piece, that floats on the currents of the city-market, for which slower pace means losses and speed is money. The excess of speed pulverizes life: it does not make it more intense. And wisdom... it takes to waste time.

When you return home and see your son, your daughter, and you “waste time”, but in this conversation that is fundamental for society, you “waste time” with children; and when you come home and there is the grandfather or grandmother who is perhaps no longer lucid or, I don’t know, has lost something of the ability to speak, and you stay with him or with her, you “waste time”, but this “waste of time” strengthens the human family. It is necessary to spend time, time that is not lucrative, with children and with the elderly, because they give us another ability to see life.

The pandemic, in which we are still forced to live, has imposed – very painfully, unfortunately – a halt to the obtuse cult of speed. And in this period, grandparents have acted as a barrier to the affective “dehydration” of the youngest. The visible alliance of the generations, that harmonizes

pace and rhythms, restores to use the hope of not living life in vain. And it restores to each of us the love for our vulnerable lives, blocking the way to the obsession with speed, which simply consumes it. The key word here – to each one of you, I ask: do you know how to waste time, or are you always in a hurry? “No, I’m in a rush, I can’t...”. Do you know how to waste time with grandparents, with the elderly? Do you know how to spend time playing with your children, with children? This is the touchstone. Think about it. And this restores to each person the love for our vulnerable life, blocking the road of the obsession with speed, which simply consumes it. The rhythms of old age are an indispensable resource for grasping the meaning of life marked by time. The elderly have their rhythms, but they are rhythms that help us. Thanks to this mediation, the destination of life to the encounter with God becomes

more credible: a design that is hidden in the creation of the human being “in his image and likeness” and is sealed in the Son of God becoming man.

Today there is a greater longevity of human life. This gives us the opportunity to increase the covenant between all times of life. So much longevity, but we must make more alliance. And this also helps us to increase with the meaning of life in its entirety. The meaning of life is not only in adulthood, say, from 25 to 60 years – no. The meaning of life is all of it, from birth to death, and you should be able to interact with everyone, and also to have emotional relationships with everyone, so that your maturity will be richer and stronger. And it also offers us this meaning of life, which is everything. May the Spirit grant us the intelligence and strength for this reform: a reform is needed. The

arrogance of the time of the clock must be converted into the beauty of the rhythms of life. This is the reform we must make in our hearts, in the family and in society. I repeat: what must we reform? The arrogance of the time of the clock must be converted into the beauty of the rhythms of life. The alliance of the generations is indispensable. A society in which the elderly do not speak with the young, the young do not speak with the elderly, is a sterile society, without a future, a society that does not look to the horizon but rather looks at itself. And it becomes lonely. May God help us to find the right music for this harmonization of the various ages: the little ones, the elderly, adults, everyone together: a beautiful symphony of dialogue. Thank you.

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