

# **"Forsake me not when my strength is spent"**

In his 1 June general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on old age, speaking about the example of prayer and faith given by the elderly.

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*Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!*

The beautiful prayer of the elderly man that we find in Psalm 71, which we have listened to, encourages us to

meditate on the strong tension that dwells in the condition of old age, when the memory of labours overcome and blessings received is put to the test of faith and hope.

The test already presents itself with the weakness that accompanies the passage through the fragility and vulnerability of advanced age. And the Psalmist – an elderly man who addresses the Lord – explicitly mentions the fact that this process becomes an opportunity for abandonment, deception, and for prevarication and arrogance, which at times prey upon the elderly. It is true! In this throwaway society, this throwaway culture, elderly people are cast aside and suffer these things. A form of cowardice in which we specialize in this society of ours. Indeed, there is no lack of those who take advantage of the elderly, to cheat them and to intimidate them in myriad ways. Often, we read in the

newspapers or hear news of elderly people who are unscrupulously tricked out of their savings, or are left without protection or abandoned without care; or offended by forms of contempt and intimidated into renouncing their rights. Such cruelty also occurs within families – and this is serious, but it happens in families too. The elderly who are rejected, abandoned in rest homes, without their children coming to visit them, or they go a few times a year. The elderly person is placed in the corner of existence. And this happens: it happens today, it happens in families, it happens all the time. We must reflect on this.

The whole of society must hasten to take care of its elderly – they are its treasure! – who are increasingly numerous and often also the most abandoned. When we hear of elderly people who are dispossessed of their autonomy, of their security, even

their home, we understand that the *ambivalence of today's society* with regard to old age is not a problem of occasional emergencies, but a feature of that throwaway culture that poisons the world we live in. The elder of the Psalm confides his discouragement to God: "My enemies speak concerning me", he says.

"Those who watch for my life consult together / and say, 'God has forsaken him; / pursue and seize him / for there is none to deliver him'" (vv. 10-11).

The consequences are fatal. Old age not only loses its dignity, but it even doubts that it deserves to continue. In this way, we are all tempted to hide our vulnerability, to hide our illness, our age and our seniority, because we fear that they are the precursor to our loss of dignity. Let us ask ourselves: is it human to induce this feeling? How is it that modern civilization, so advanced and

efficient, is so uncomfortable with sickness and old age? How is it that it hides illness, it hides old age? And how is it that politics, which is so committed to defining the limits of a dignified survival, is at the same time insensitive to the dignity of a loving coexistence with the old and the sick?

The elder of the Psalm we have heard, this elderly man who sees his old age as a defeat, rediscovers *trust in the Lord*. He feels the need to be helped. And he turns to God. Saint Augustine, commenting on this Psalm, exhorts the elderly: “Fear not, that you be cast away in that weakness, in that old age. ... Why do you fear lest He should forsake you, lest He cast you away for the time of old age, when your strength shall have failed? Yea at that time in you will be the strength of Him, when your strength shall have failed” (*Expositions on the Psalms* 36,

881-882), this is what Augustine says. And the elderly Psalmist invokes: “Deliver me and rescue me, / incline thy ear to me, and save me. / Be thou to me a rock of refuge, / a strong fortress, to save me, / for thou art my rock and my fortress” (vv. 2-3). The invocation testifies to God’s faithfulness and summons his ability to rouse consciences that have been diverted by insensibility to the span of mortal life, which must be protected in its entirety. He again prays thus: “O God, be not far from me; / O my God, make haste to help me! / May my accusers be put to shame and consumed; / with scorn and disgrace may they be covered / who seek my hurt” (vv. 12-13).

Indeed, shame should fall on those who take advantage of the weakness of illness and old age. Prayer renews in the heart of the elder the promise of God’s faithfulness and His blessing. *The elderly man rediscovers*

*prayer and bears witness to its strength.* Jesus, in the Gospels, never rejects the prayer of those who are in need of help. The elderly, by virtue of their weakness, can teach those who are living in other ages of life that we all need to abandon ourselves to the Lord, to invoke his help. In this sense, we must all learn from old age: yes, there is a gift in being elderly, understood as abandoning oneself to the care of others, starting with God himself.

There is then a “*magisterium of frailty*”, do not hide frailties, no. It is true, there is a reality and there is a magisterium of frailty, which old age is able to remind us of in a credible way for the whole span of human life. Do not hide old age, do not hide the fragility of old age. This is a teaching for all of us. This teaching opens up a decisive horizon for the reform of our own civilization. A reform that is now indispensable for

the benefit of the coexistence of all. The marginalization of the elderly – both conceptual and practical – corrupts all seasons of life, not just that of old age. Every one of us can think today of the elderly people in the family: how do I relate to them, do I remember them, do I go to visit them? Do I try to make sure they lack nothing? Do I respect them? The elderly who are in my family: think of your mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, aunts and uncles, friends ... Have I cancelled them from my life? Or do I go to them to obtain wisdom, the wisdom of life? Remember that you too will become elderly. Old age comes for everyone. And treat the elderly today as you would wish to be treated in your old age. They are the memory of the family, the memory of humanity, the memory of the country. Protect the elderly, who are wisdom. May the Lord grant the elderly who are part of the Church the generosity of this

invocation and of this provocation. May this trust in the Lord spread to us. And this, for the good of all, for them.

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