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Honouring Old Age

In his 20 April general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on the elderly, speaking about the honour that they merit.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today, with the help of the Word of God that we have heard, we open a passage through the fragility of old age, marked in a special way by the experiences of confusion and

despondency, of loss and abandonment, of disillusionment and doubt. Of course, the experiences of our frailty in the face of life's dramatic - sometimes tragic - situations can occur at any stage of life. However, in old age they can produce less of an impression and induce in others a kind of habituation, even annoyance. How many times have we heard or thought: 'Old people are a nuisance' – 'But, these old people are always a nuisance': don't deny it, that's the way it is... We've said it, we've thought it... The more serious wounds of childhood and youth rightly provoke a sense of injustice and rebellion, a strength to react and fight. On the other hand, the wounds, even serious ones, of old age are inevitably accompanied by the feeling that, in any case, life is not contradicting itself, because it has already been lived. And so the elderly are somewhat removed from

our experience: we want to keep them at a distance.

In the common human experience, love - as is said - descends: it does not return to the life behind with the same force that it pours out on the life that is still before us. The gratuitousness of love also appears in this: parents have always known this, the old soon learn it.

Nevertheless, revelation opens a way for reciprocating love in a different way: that of honouring those who have gone before us, the way of *honouring* the people who came before us, of honouring the elderly.

This special love that paves the way in the form of honour – that is, tenderness and respect at the same time – intended for the elderly is sealed by God's commandment.

"Honour thy father and mother" is a solemn commitment, the first of the "second tablet" of the Ten

Commandments. It is not just about one's own father and mother. It is about their generation and the generations before, whose leave-taking can also be slow and prolonged, creating a time and space of long-lasting coexistence with the other ages of life. In other words, it is about the old age of life, old age...

Honour is a good word to frame this aspect of returning love that concerns old age. That is, we have received the love of parents, of grandparents, and now we return this love to them, to the elderly, to our grandparents. Today we have rediscovered the term 'dignity', to indicate the value of respecting and caring for the age [life] of everyone. Dignity, here, is essentially equivalent to honour: honouring father and mother, honouring the elderly, and recognizing the dignity they possess.

Let us think carefully about this beautiful expression of love which is honour. Even care for the sick, the support of those who are not self-sufficient, the guarantee of sustenance, can be lacking honour. Honour is lacking when an excess of confidence, instead of being expressed as delicacy and affection, tenderness and respect, is transformed into roughness and abuse. This occurs when weakness is reproached, and even punished, as if it were a fault, and when bewilderment and confusion become an opening for derision and aggression. It can happen even in the home, in nursing homes, as well as in offices or in the open spaces of the city. Encouraging in young people, even indirectly, an attitude of condescension - and even contempt - for the elderly, for their weaknesses and their precariousness, produces horrible things. It opens the way to unimaginable excesses. The young

people who set fire to a “bum”’s blanket – we’ve seen this, haven’t we? – because they see him as a human reject, and we often think that the old are the refuse, or we put them in the trash; these young people who have set fire to a bum’s blanket are the tip of the iceberg, that is, of the contempt for a life that, far from the attractions and impulses of youth, already seems to be a life to be cast aside. ‘Refuse’ is the word, isn’t it? To despise the elderly and cast them from life, to put them aside, to put them down.

This contempt, which dishonours the elderly, actually dishonours all of us. If I dishonour the elderly, I dishonour myself. The passage from the Book of Sirach, which we heard at the beginning, is rightly harsh on this dishonour, which cries out for vengeance in the sight of God. There is a passage in the story of Noah that is very expressive in this regard – I

don't know if you have it mind. The elderly Noah, the hero of the flood and still a hard worker, lies unconscious after having had a few too many drinks. He's already old, but he's had too much to drink. His sons, in order not to wake him up and embarrass him, gently cover him, looking aside, with great respect. This text is very beautiful and says everything about the honour due to an old man. To cover the weakness of the elderly, so they don't feel ashamed. A text that helps us a lot.

In spite of all the material provisions that richer and more organised societies make available for old age - of which we can certainly be proud - the struggle for the restoration of that special form of love which is honour still seems fragile and immature. We must do all we can to support and encourage it, offering better social and cultural support to

those who are sensitive to this decisive form of the 'civilisation of love'.

And on this point, allow me to offer some advice to parents: please, bring your children, young children, closer to the elderly, always bring them closer. And when the elderly person is ill, a bit out of their mind, always approach them: let them know that this is our flesh, that this is what has made it possible for us to be here. Please don't push the elderly away. And if there is no other option than to send them to a nursing home, please visit them and bring the children to see them: they are the honour of our civilisation, the old people who opened the doors. And many times, the children forget this.

I'll tell you something personal: I used to love visiting nursing homes in Buenos Aires. I went often. I went often, I visited each one... And I

remember once I asked a lady: ‘And how many children do you have?’ – ‘I have four, all married, with grandchildren ...,’ and she started talking to me about the family. ‘And do they come [to visit]?’ – ‘Yes, [she said,] ‘they always come!’ When I left the room, the nurse, who had heard, said to me: ‘Father, she told a lie to cover up for her children. Nobody has come for six months!’ This is discarding the old, it is thinking that the old are refuse. Please: it is a grave sin. This is the first great commandment, and the only one that says the reward: ‘Honour your father and your mother, and you will have long life on earth.’ This commandment to honour the elderly gives us a blessing, which is expressed in this way: ‘You will have long life.’ Please cherish the elderly. And [even] if their mind goes, cherish the old. Because they are the presence of history, the presence of my family, and thanks to them I am

here, we can all say: thanks to you, grandfather and grandmother, I am alive. Please don't leave them alone. And this, looking after the elderly, is not a question of cosmetics and plastic surgery, no. Rather, it is a question of honour, which must transform how we educate the young about life and its stages. Love for the human person that is common to us, including honouring a life lived, is not a matter for the old. Rather it is an ambition that will bring radiance to the youth who inherit its best qualities. May the wisdom of God's Spirit grant us to open the horizon of this true cultural revolution with the necessary energy. Thank you.
