

"We need an old age gifted with lively spiritual senses"

In his 30 March general audience Pope Francis continued his catechesis on the elderly, speaking about the figures of Simeon and Anna in the Gospel.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our path of catecheses on the theme of old age, today we will look

at the tender picture painted by the evangelist Saint Luke, who depicts two elderly figures, Simeon and Anna. Their reason for living, before taking leave of this world, is to await God's visit. They were waiting for God, that is, Jesus, to visit them. Simeon knows, by a premonition of the Holy Spirit, that he will not die before seeing the Messiah. Anna attends the temple every day, devoting herself to his service. Both of them recognize the presence of the Lord in the child Jesus, who fills their long wait with consolation and reassures them as they bid farewell to life. This is a scene of encounter with Jesus, and of farewell.

What can we learn from these two elderly figures filled with spiritual vitality?

First, we learn that the fidelity of waiting *sharpens the senses*. Besides, as we know, the Holy Spirit does

precisely this: *enlightens the senses*. In the ancient hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, with which we continue to this day to invoke the Holy Spirit, we say: “*Accende lumen sensibus*”, “Guide our minds with your blest light”, enlighten our senses. The Spirit is capable of doing this: of sharpening the senses of the soul, despite the limits and the wounds of the senses of the body. Old age weakens, in one way or another, the sensibility of the body: one is going blind, another one deaf. However, an old age spent in awaiting God’s visit will not miss his passage; on the contrary, it will be even more ready to grasp it, will have greater sensitivity to welcome the Lord when he passes. Remember that it is typical of the Christian to be attentive to the visits of the Lord, because the Lord passes in our life, with inspirations, with invitations to better ourselves. And Saint Augustine used to say: “I fear that Jesus will pass me by

unnoticed”. It is the Holy Spirit who prepares the senses to understand when the Lord is visiting us, just as he did with Simeon and Anna.

Today we need this more than ever: we need *an old age gifted with lively spiritual senses* capable of recognizing the signs of God, or rather, the Sign of God, who is Jesus. A sign that challenges us, always: Jesus challenges us because he is “a sign that is spoken against” (*Lk 2: 34*) – but which fills us with joy. Because crisis does not necessarily bring sadness, no: being in crisis in service to the Lord very often gives you peace and joy. The *anaesthesia of the spiritual senses* – and this is bad – the anaesthesia of the spiritual senses, in the excitement and stultification of those of the body, is a widespread syndrome in a society that cultivates the illusion of eternal youth, and its most dangerous feature lies in the fact that it is mostly unaware. We do

not realize we are anaesthetized. And this happens. It happens. It has always happened and it happens in our times. Numb senses, without understanding what is happening: when they are numb, the inner senses, the senses of the Spirit that enable us to understand the presence of God or the presence of evil, cannot distinguish between them.

When you lose the sense of touch or of taste, you realize immediately. However, you can ignore that of the soul, that sensitivity of the soul, for a long time, living without realizing that you have lost the sensitivity of the soul. It is not simply a matter of thinking of God or religion. The insensitivity of the spiritual senses relates to compassion and pity, shame and remorse, fidelity and devotion, tenderness and honour, responsibility for oneself and for others. It is curious: insensitivity stops you understanding

compassion, it stops you understanding pity, it stops you feeling shame or having remorse for having done something bad... It is like that. The numbed spiritual senses confuse you and you no longer feel those things, spiritually. And old age becomes, so to speak, the first casualty, the first victim of this loss of sensibility. In a society that exercises sensibility primarily for enjoyment, there cannot but be a lack of attention to the frail, and the competition of the winners prevails. And this is how sensitivity is lost. Certainly, the rhetoric of inclusion is the ritual formula of every politically correct discourse. But it still does not bring about a real correction of the practices of normal co-existence: *a culture of social tenderness struggles to grow*. The spirit of human fraternity – which I felt it was necessary to relaunch forcefully – is like a discarded garment, to be admired, but ... in a museum. One

loses human sensibility, these movements of the Spirit that make us human.

It is true, in real life we can observe, with moving gratitude, many young people capable of honouring this fraternity to its fullest. But herein, exactly, lies the problem: there is a gap, a shameful gap, between the testimony of this lifeblood of social tenderness and the conformism that compels youth to present itself in an entirely different way. What can we do to bridge this gap?

From the story of Simeon and Anna, but also from other biblical accounts of the Spirit-sensitive elderly, comes a hidden indication that deserves to be brought to the forefront. In what, in real terms, does the revelation that kindles the sensitivity of Simeon and Anna consist? It consists in recognizing in a child, whom they did not beget and whom they see for

the first time, the sure sign of God's visitation. They accept *not to be protagonists, but only witnesses*. And when one accepts not being a protagonist, but gets involved as a witness, it is good: that man or that woman is maturing well. But those who always want to be protagonist and nothing else, never mature on that journey towards the fullness of old age. God's visitation is not embodied in their lives, it does not bring them onto the scene as saviours: God does not take flesh in their generation, but in the generation to come. They lose their spirit, they lose the desire to live with maturity, and as one usually says, they live in a superficial way. It is the great generation of the superficial, who do not allow themselves to feel things with the sensibility of the Spirit. But why do they not let themselves? Partly out of laziness, and partly because they are already unable: they have lost it. It is bad

when a civilization loses the sensibility of the Spirit. On the contrary, it is wonderful when we find elderly people like Simeon and Anna who conserve this sensibility of the Spirit, and who are capable of understanding the different situations, just as these two understood the situation in front of them, which was the manifestation of the Messiah. There is no resentment and no recrimination for this, when they are in this state of stillness, of being still. Instead, great emotion and great comfort when the spiritual senses are still lively. The emotion and comfort of being able to see and announce that the history of their generation is not lost or wasted, thanks to an event that is incarnate and manifested in the generation that follows. And this is what elderly people feel when the grandchildren come to speak with them: they feel revived. "Ah, my life is still here". It is so important to go to see the

elderly; it is so important to listen to them. It is so important to speak with them, because there is this exchange of civilization, this exchange of maturity between the young and the elderly. And in this way, our civilization advances in a mature way.

Only spiritual old age can give this witness, humble and dazzling, making it authoritative and exemplary for all. Old age that has cultivated the sensitivity of the soul *extinguishes all envy between generations*, all resentment, all recrimination for an advent of God in the generation to come, which arrives together with the departure of one's own. And this is what happens to an elderly person who is open to a young person who is open: he or she bids farewell to life while, so to speak, "handing over" life to the new generation. And this is the farewell of Simeon and Anna: "Let

your servant depart in peace". The spiritual sensitivity of old age is capable of breaking down competition and conflict between generations in a credible and definitive way. This is certainly impossible for men, but possible for God. And nowadays we are in great need of this, of the sensibility of the spirit, the maturity of the spirit; we need wise, elders, mature in spirit, who give hope for life! Thank you.

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