



# LIFE ASCENDING INTERNATIONAL

ENGLISH

*On the 5 continents*



**VIE MONTANTE INTERNATIONALE • VIDA ASCENDENTE INTERNACIONAL**

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# Introduction

**A**fter a period of time where life moves to the rhythm of one's work and the children's education, there comes a new stage for an increasing number of men and women. Whether we call them **the retired, the elderly, seniors, old people, the older generation, the old...** they can look forward to 15, 20, 25 or more years. If some of them benefit from help from the State or from an insurance policy, others rely for the most part on help from their families.

For each of them the question is the same : how to ensure that this period of one's life will be fruitful and of use to others.

Vie Montante Internationale (VMI), an international association approved by pontifical right, offers an opportunity to the people who have reached this stage of their lives to join a movement which will help them to give meaning to their life.

This document sets out the shared aims of the movements which, throughout the world, belong to VMI. It goes without saying that within their shared goals, each movement makes its own decisions, according to the customs and culture of its own country.

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Extracts from the document « *The dignity and mission of the elderly in the Church and in the world* »

➔ **FROM CHAPTER III**

*We know that, given the opportunity, elderly people take an active part in the life of the community around them, whether it be on a civic, cultural or associative level. This is confirmed by the number of jobs involving heavy responsibilities which are done by retired people – in voluntary service for example, as well as their considera-*

ble political commitment. It is up to us to change the misunderstandings that people have about elderly people today, the prejudices and preconceptions which distort their image of us.

Senior citizens must be capable of influencing the policies which govern their lives, but also of those governing society in general, and that is best done through the specific organisations destined for their age group, political party or trades union. We must therefore encourage the setting-up of groups for elderly people and support those which already exist. As John-Paul II stated, they (the groups), “must be recognised by those responsible within society as the legitimate voice of retired people, and especially of the poorest.”

## ➔ FROM CHAPTER IV

The contribution the elderly themselves can make to pastoral care is vital. Thanks to their wide experience of living and their faith they can appreciate concepts both traditional and modern, and they can bring the whole community to share in their appreciation. Far from being passive observers of the Church's pastoral plan, the elderly are often influential campaigners - especially among their own age group - for they know better than anyone the problems and sensitivities of this stage of life. The apostolate of the elderly, in the form of a testament to life among people of their own age, has particular importance today. In our day and age, as Pope Paul VI said in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, man “is happier to listen to eye-witnesses than to experts (.....) or, if he listens to the experts, it's because they have been eye-witnesses” (n.41) Therefore, for a practising Christian, it is important to know how to show others that this period of one's life can be a significant and valuable part of the whole of human existence. And therefore it is equally not unimportant for the elderly to announce the Word of God directly to those of their own age, and also to their children's and their grand-children's generations.

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# Some history

## Important dates

**1962** ▶ The Vie Montante Movement was officially born in Paris, based on the experience of groups of lay people under the chairmanship of Mgr Courbe, the Auxiliary Bishop of Paris. At that time it was presented in the following way: “Too often, people who reach a mature age get the impression that their life is over. So they have a tendency to turn back towards their past, and this makes them approach the future looking backwards .... We thought it would be a good thing for the elderly to help each other out of that pessimism brought on by solitude – which some of us risk falling into – so as to refocus ourselves on the future with optimism and confidence”.

Groups were quickly started in Switzerland, Belgium and Canada.

**1985** ▶ Life Ascending International (VMI) was authorised in Rome with the aim of facilitating exchanges and contacts between lay national apostolic organisations wishing to form part of pastoral action for the retired and elderly, and of setting up such movements throughout the world.

**1996** ▶ Decree of Recognition by the Pontifical Council for the Laymen (CPPL) for Vie Montante Internationale (VMI) as an “international association of the faithful, of pontifical right”.

# Examples of movements set up throughout the world

## IN CANADA IN 1972



During a visit to Paris around 1970, Mr Georges Sainte-Marie from Canada noticed an advertisement about a meeting of Vie Montante. He attended the meeting and asked those in charge if he could start such a group in his own diocese. Mgr Gérard-Marie Coder re agreed to his request, and Life Ascending was started in the diocese of Longueuil in 1972. Father François Sailler of Life Ascending in France was lent to Canada for 6 months to help in the setting up of the movement. He stayed on there and is there still !

## IN JAPAN IN 1985



Life Ascending was started in northern Japan (in Hakodate-Hokkaido ) by Father Philippe Gouraud after the creation in Rome of Life Ascending International (VMI). Ten years later VM Tokyo was founded and that has now become the headquarters of the movement in Japan.

## IN PORTUGAL IN 1985



In January 1985 Alberto Marxuach, a member of Life Ascending Spain, contacted Caritas Portugal and asked for their help in setting up the Movement in Portugal. Caritas put Alberto in touch with the Federation of 3<sup>rd</sup>-age groups, whose President, Elvira Abranches, was delighted with the idea. Some days later a meeting was organised with René Tardy from France and a few other interested people. This first group was invited to take part in the Spanish general meeting and they then started the Movement in Portugal. Some time later this group, meeting in Lisbon, heard of another group which had been meeting for the past year in Porto, started by a Portuguese lady who had belonged to VMI

France while she was living there. Elvira Abranches was elected the European Co-ordinator and she organised the first European meeting in Fatima in 1986.

## **IN AUSTRALIA IN 1999**



In 1998 a Dominican nun, Sister Patricia Nichols, while on holiday in England, met some groups of Life Ascending and was impressed by them. On her return to Australia she invited five couples to reflect together on the Word of God and what it told us about that particular period of our lives. They became the first group. 'Sister Pat' led the Movement in Australia for 12 years. It has continued to grow, with the support of the Archbishop of Sydney, and since 2010 the national President is a lay person. The leaders of the Movement are hoping to introduce it into other parts of Oceania. ■

# The international meetings : dates and themes

## **1985 ROME** *(Italy)*

Elderly people, witnesses and apostles of hope

## **1989 PANAMA** *(Rep of Panama)*

For a life lived freely and to the full

## **1994 MIAMI** *(USA)*

VMI at the dawn of the third millennium

## **1998 DAKAR** *(Senegal)*

The charisms of the elderly ..... riches to share

## **2002 BANGKOK** *(Thailand)*

VMI in the pastoral care of the elderly

## **2006 LOURDES** *(France)*

The elderly, a sign of hope for today's world

## **2010 CAP DE LA MADELEINE** *(Canada)*

Witness for a world in crisis

# LIFE ASCENDING INTERNATIONAL



## NORTH AMERICA

English speaking Canada  
French speaking Canada  
United States

## LATIN AMERICA

|            |       |                |
|------------|-------|----------------|
| Argentina  | ..... | Honduras       |
| Bolivia    | ..... | Mexico         |
| Brazil     | ..... | Panamá         |
| Colombia   | ..... | Paraguay       |
| Costa Rica | ..... | Peru           |
| Ecuador    | ..... | Dominican Rep. |
| Guatemala  | ..... | Uruguay        |
| Haiti      | ..... | Venezuela      |



## AFRICA

|              |       |                |
|--------------|-------|----------------|
| Benin        | ..... | Mozambique     |
| Burkina Faso | ..... | Island Maurice |
| Cameroon     | ..... | Uganda         |
| Ivory Coast  | ..... | DR of Congo    |
| Malawi       | ..... | Rwanda         |
| Mali         | ..... | Senegal        |
| Morocco      | ..... | Tanzania       |

# IN THE WORLD



## EUROPE

French speaking Belgium  
Dutch speaking Belgium  
Spain  
France  
Ireland  
Poland  
Portugal  
Rumania  
United Kingdom  
Slovenia  
Switzerland

## ASIA

Hong-Kong  
Japan  
Malaysia  
Singapore  
Taiwan  
Vietnam



## OCEANIA

Australia

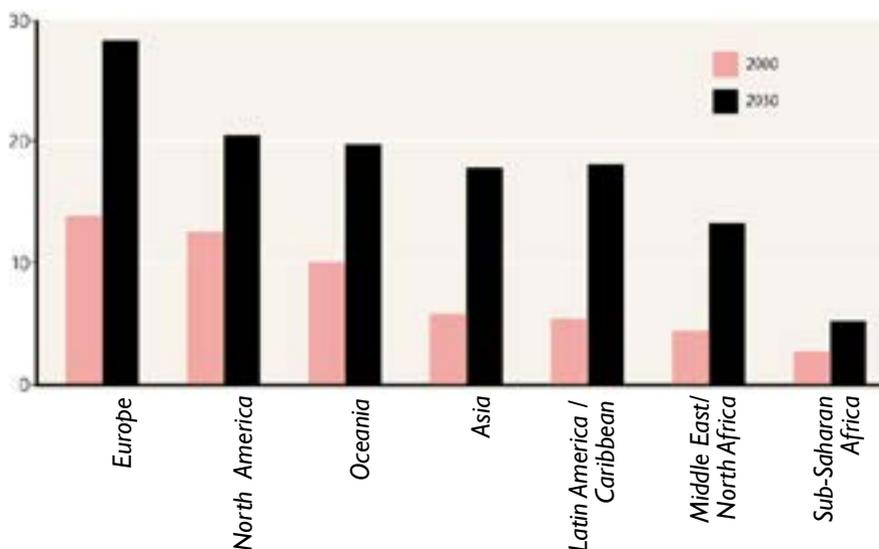


# A new age of life

**T**he longevity of populations today is affecting every country and every region of the world; and this longevity becomes more noticeable in southern countries than in northern ones. *(See graphics below).*

The number of people aged 65 and over will soon outnumber that of the children of less than five years for the first time in human history. We hear more and more about the influence that the elderly have - on voting figures, on public spending (the cost of pensions and health care....) on the generation still at work.

*Percentage of the elderly of 65 years and over*



# Giving a direction to this new stage

This new stage certainly brings about changes in one's life. Stopping professional activities involve profound changes in the roles we play in family and social situations. The years of our retirement have become a long interval during which we can build and to which we need to give a meaning.

For some of us retirement is the start of a new life which will allow us to accomplish a dream, to do things they have never been able to do : travel, painting, music ... Some people use their remaining health doing useful voluntary work within their family or helping their community. For others on the other hand it can become a time for solitude, abandonment, boredom, dissatisfaction tied to lack of money, to poor health, to loneliness .... Between these two extremes we can find wide variations depending on one's sex, one's education and one's finances.

*We now have a period of life which can be full of various un-paid activities which are nonetheless useful within society.*

But to-day it is no longer just a time for rest and leisure. The invention of the title "retired person" brought about the creation of a new social class. Alongside youth, the time for learning and training, alongside one's working life in Farming, Industry or the Services – and before reaching old age, when strength and energy decline – we now have a period of life which can be full of various un-paid activities which are nonetheless useful within society. Imagine for a moment what would happen

if retired people no longer took part in the various social, political, economic, cultural and ecclesiastical activities of the Church.

At the same time we mustn't lose sight of that span of years we usually define as "old age", accompanied by what Father Teilhard de Chardin calls our "diminishings". Among life's stages, this one of old age is a particularly important one

for mankind. It is the time when one's value is no longer estimated according to one's capacity to produce. Unfortunately, elderly people are at risk of being ignored or marginalized, reduced to the statistic of how much they cost or, worse still, to the amount of money they might be worth as consumers.

This is why it's important to recognise the true value of this quiet stage of our life, in a society becoming more and more intergenerational. In a world where money threatens to submerge all other human values, to dominate all the other ages and stages of life, isn't protecting the elderly, like protecting children, fundamental to protecting the real value of all human life, the dignity of the individual created in the image of God, and called upon to share in His life.

## Charisms for a new stage of life

### EXPERIENCE OF LIFE

John Paul II speaking about older people said that they have *"a view full of wisdom about matters and situations in the world, a clearer Vision of the requirements of love between men and the faithfulness of the divine love which guides each human existence and the history of the world."*

We are reaching the age that could be called "the stage of transition». In order to get through it we can call on all we have learnt during these long years, which have brought us resources and talents. Each in his own way, in the light of his own experiences is the possessor of an important 'science of life'. The joys

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and sufferings we have met, the successes and failures, the struggles between Yes or No, which are the very essence of the human condition, have allowed us to build up our own view of the criteria and value by which we judge ourselves and others.

## A WISDOM

In that way we are granted a wisdom which helps us to grasp the essential, and to let go of many bits and pieces which have imprisoned us. Age leads us to detachment, and through that to a gentler attitude towards ourselves and others, without distress or regrets. At peace with ourselves, we can try to be messengers of peace to our relationships with others. The availability that we enjoy

*We want to  
work to build  
up a civilisation  
of love*

allows us the time to meet others freely. We can pass on freely the love that we receive from God. Serenity springs from the certainty that the Lord is with us.

The Spirit who '*blows where he wishes*' transforms our talents into charisms, 'free gifts for the service of others'. It is through that we find the meaning of this stage of old age. We still have a part to play, and nobody can take our place.

John-Paul II was urging us on when he said: '*The world needs you*'. In truth the world does need witnesses, witnesses who are not afraid to share their training and to receive the messages of other generations. With our condition and circumstances we shall be transmitters of the true values, and participants in the family and the social circle. Together, especially with the young people, we want to work to build up a civilisation of love which will change this individualistic society into a society of solidarity. ■

# Life Ascending : a Movement for retired people

**A** Christian who reaches the age of retirement should still live the message of the Gospel. Wherever he lives, according to his means, his abilities and talents, his availability, he must take part in bringing about a more human world based on justice, respect for the fundamental rights and dignity of the individual, and the fight against poverty – which affects so many elderly people in the world – and the search for peace and solidarity.

Living this ideal is not easy. It's the reason why the Life Ascending movements throughout the world offer retired people the chance to join a sharing community where members care for one another so that each one may discover their own particular mission in life and find a way to bring it to fulfilment through their daily life. There are many possible openings for personal involvement in the service of others in our daily lives. It is the task of Life Ascending to awaken and support its retired members in this objective.

*Retired people might  
bring hope to other men  
and women of our time.*

Neither can the movements ignore the questions which plague the societies in which we live, be they social, economic, ethical or political ..... In all these areas the retired, by reason of their experience, have a contribution to make alongside other generations. Depending on the history of each country the cultural,

social, economic or political contexts will obviously vary. Each movement must recognise intelligently the various possibilities for witness and action that its members might undertake, wherever they live and whatever their gifts, so as to bring hope to other men and women of our time.

# 1 • Life Ascending, a Church movement

## A CHURCH OPEN TO THE WORLD

« *The world is the field in which God places His children like good seeds* »: these words from the Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist open our movement to a new dimension on the scale of God's love. Our contacts and activities, simple and insignificant as they may seem, have a place in this great love. The sharing that we do in our meetings and groups show us how to become the "good seed" that the parable talks about : in this disparate world, in our neighbourhoods and villages, and in retirement homes, the Christians share the same hopes and sufferings as all men and are called on to open themselves to be the seed of a little hope, to take the initiative in acts of love, to work for more justice, to show forgiveness for others and be reconciled to them ... and the elderly are wholly ready to take part in this witness, this "*sign of hope for the world of today*".

*The Church does not exist for herself alone....but to be a sign of the Good News.*

There are a thousand ways to bring alive the Good News of a God who, in spite of closed minds, or rejections and digressions, doesn't stop loving us, calling us, saving us when we lose ourselves ..... In spite of the violence, the blatant inequality, the individual and collective selfishness, we do not relinquish hope for this world that God so loved that He gave it His only Son. For our faith is fundamentally connected to the world we know, to the people and the countries where we live in and represent, that we remember in our prayers. The Church of which we are members does not exist for herself alone. She exists, as Pope Paul VI said, "*to evangelise*". That means to be a

sign of the Good News. A sign, but also a messenger of this Good News, being present and active among all those who are looking for a path to hope, the warmth of a friendship, the benefit of sharing.

That is why our Movement, for the increasing number of elderly people throughout the world, is first and foremost a place for spirituality and support for their witness, a source of renewal through prayer, through Gospel reading and sharing. It is also a basis for active charity in the service of our human brothers and sisters. In our increasingly globalised world, it is essential that we all help one another locally as well as on a global scale, to deepen our faith and our hope, and to be enduringly present in this complex world – which needs everybody's efforts to develop into a "shared home" where everybody will have their place.



In Australia, the movement invites the groups

- to read the Gospels, or classic religious works, and discuss their relevance
- to meet with other Christian and non Christian organisations
- to talk openly about their faith with the people they meet.

## **PASTORAL CARE OF THE ELDERLY AND A CHURCH MOVEMENT**

Most dioceses make available certain services to their members, each one with a specific pastoral aim : to teach the catechism, to study the liturgy, to pray for vocations, to work with young people, and also to care for the needs of the elderly. This last usually involves visiting and giving spiritual, or sometimes material, support. Of course many elderly people take part in diocesan or parochial activities like the liturgy, the catechism, visiting the sick ... it forms part of the organised pastoral work of the Church, overseen by the bishops and the clergy.

Another form of the Church's mission lies in the movements and associations. Vatican II underlined their importance in its decree relating to the work of the Laity in both national and international fields : *"given society's increasing levels*

*of organisation and its current evolution". It also affirms the right of lay people to "found associations and organise them, as well as belong to those already in existence". It especially supports movements "which acknowledge and encourage a closer relationship between the faith of its members and their everyday lives". (Decree on the apostolate of the Laity, no. 19). Life Ascending comes into this category as a movement of Catholic Action. It is directed and run by lay people and the clergy are its Spiritual Directors.*

## **THE LIFE ASCENDING MOVEMENT**

In order to check regularly whether Life Ascending is fulfilling its mission, we can do no better than reread the Decree of recognition where the Holy See defines it. Let us look at two passages :

*The mission of the movement is to "permit elderly and retired people to play a full part in their local and church community and to be active players in their own evangelisation."*

*" ....its action corresponds to the pastoral aims of the Church for the elderly and will encourage in its members, whatever their physical capacity, a sense of spiritual, apostolic and socio-cultural commitment, as well as brotherly awareness;.... in this way it will play its part in solving the problems which all societies*

*Its action corresponds to the pastoral aims of the Church for the elderly*

*are facing given the growth in the number of elderly and retired people and the need to give relevant meaning to their lives until their natural end ....".*

In the orientations which followed the Bishops' Synod on the lay faithful, elderly people were asked to *"continue their apostolic and missionary role ... which, at the present time, has taken on a specific and original form."* And it goes on : *"At the present time early retirement and the growth in the number of elderly people in the different countries of the world is making more opportunities for apostolic activity among elderly people".*

The leading arena for Life Ascending's mission is therefore defined : it is in the world itself, within human societies. Pope Paul VI said *"the field proper to evangelisation by the laity is the world ..."* and he listed the different areas – political, economic, social, cultural ... not forgetting volunteer work *"an important expression of apostolic work"*.

## 2 • The objectives of the movement

To begin with, these objectives were described as the three *pillars* : friendship, spirituality, apostolate.

In the same way as the life of the Church has changed over the last fifty years, the meaning and the content of these *pillars* has also evolved. Today we prefer to say that Life Ascending wishes to help its members to :

### **LIFE FRATELNALLY**

The words Friendship and Life Ascending go hand-in-hand. But, as with the other cornerstones, it is worth re-examining "Friendship" today in the light of an evolving world, to see what it implies for each of us and for our relationships within our groups. Words change their meaning, become less precise, and daily routines can weaken even the most beautiful sentiments.

So making friends, which we consider such a natural process, always needs a period of mutual adjustment. It is remarkable how often St Paul, in his letters to the new Christian communities, comes back to the question of the relationships between the members ; he says : *"adopt feelings of tender compassion, of goodwill, of humility, of gentleness and patience; tolerate one another and forgive each other if either one of you has something to complain about"* (Col 3,12-13) Who could say that this advice is no longer relevant?

Friendship, said Pope John XXIII, is a form of charity. And acts of charity, of brotherhood, are recognisable in the communities formed by Christ's disciples.

Today it is ever more urgent for Christians to practise what the Acts of the Apostles calls *"brotherly communion"* and to help one another to be faithful to the Gospels. In all our countries, on all the continents, the Christian faith is confronted by other ways of believing and living, by different religions and sects, by the temptations of consumerism, or violence, or racism. It's important therefore to make time for meeting, for simple sharing, be it around a meal or a coffee, or a cake ..... that's what it is, Friendship.

This doesn't mean that we have to rely entirely on ourselves alone. Life Ascending groups are very welcoming. Their friendship stretches well beyond their personal limits and is what gives rise to the meetings with neighbours, to the visits to elderly, sick or lonely people, to all their various acts, freely undertaken. If "friendship" didn't underlie all these activities and actions we would surely deserve St Paul's warning : *"If I give away all my goods to feed the poor ... and I do it without love, then I gain nothing!"* (1 Co 13, 3)



Fraternity has always been practised in the countries of South America, and especially among the poorest groups. Those who have the fewest resources work together and help each other by organising tombolas, meals etc... Since not everyone has learned to read and write, Life Ascending runs groups for religious training which involve teaching basic reading and writing. This improves each one's self-image and increases their feelings of worth. We feel strong brotherly feelings for one another.

## **DEEPEN THEIR FAITH AND THEIR SPIRITUAL LIFE**

- **Learn about the faith**

Nowadays no-one can do a job without first taking the time to learn how to do it. And later, throughout one's working life, if one wants to remain competent, one cannot avoid keeping up with some training : work experience, conferences, reading, various kinds of study ... science and technology develop so fast!

Neither can one nowadays do without educating one's faith. Of course, we know that the Catechism we learnt as a child is no longer sufficient! Life asks us new questions. Meeting new people from other religions encourages us to understand who and what we ourselves

*To be strong, our Christian faith needs, today more than in the past, to be continually learning.*

believe in and why. In some areas we might be subjected to provocative discussions about faith from obscure sects or groups; we need to deepen our own faith, to train and educate ourselves. The evolution of our societies, of our economic life, the advances of medicine, the condition of man today, all pose new moral problems. In our own families the young people need to encounter an educated, well-formed faith among their parents and grandparents. Sometimes we don't know how to answer them when they ask questions about God, or the Bible, or the Church, or the Christian life.

To be strong, our Christian faith needs, today more than in the past, to be continually learning. More and more in every country, there are ways of doing this. The yearly themes suggested by the movement show them to us regularly. In the dioceses there are more and more training schemes : days, evenings, weekends .... Which we could participate in. Even if our time is well occupied during our retirement, we still have more leisure for some reading or a programme on the TV or radio.

The responsibility of the faithful, in the world as much as in the Church, is forever growing.

We cannot neglect our Christian education in societies where knowledge is developing in every field. It's our faith, our trust in Jesus Christ and our mission in the world of today which are at stake.

In today's world, transformed by globalisation and shaken by financial and social crises, it is particularly important that Christians should be familiar with the Social Doctrine of the Church.



Each year in France the Movement Christian of the Retired people (MCR) proposes a single theme which unites the whole movement. A single theme is found which encourages each person to grow and develop their faith while at the same time discussing current events and problems.

This annual theme, designed to aid members' reflection and sharing, is proposed by the spiritual leadership team, made up of priests and lay persons, and is scrutinised then authorised by the Management Committee.

## • Spiritual life

Among the traditional mainstays of the Life Ascending, spirituality is the one which best epitomises the Christian basis of the movement. It is normally used to describe the religious dimension of our faith – praying, meditating, receiving the Eucharist and all the other sacraments ... everything which turns us towards God."

But we reminds us that « spirituality » is not the prerogative of Christians. Other religions also pray, practise religious rites and gestures. And who are we to say that non-believers do not have a spiritual life? It is necessary to define more clearly the uniqueness of our Christian spirituality.

The source of any Christian spiritual life is the Holy Spirit : "*All those who live by the Spirit of God are the Sons of God*" says St Paul. God has sent the spirit of His Son into your hearts so you can say '*Abba, Father*'. Thus for a Christian it is this Spirit of the Lord which inspires the entire course of our lives.

At the heart of the Christian life lies the great commandment "*Love God with your whole heart, with your whole mind and with your whole strength, and love your neighbour as yourself*" (Mark 12, 33). So we cannot separate our religious practises from the love of God, which is manifested in love of our neighbour. In his first encyclical "God is Love", Pope Benedict XVI warns : "*If during my life I ignore the needs of others, concentrating solely on being 'pious' and doing my 'religious duty' then even my relationship with God will dry up*"

The active spirituality which the Life Ascending invites us to share permeates

our entire life because it is the Spirit of God that works within us and leads us to imitate Jesus Christ in love for others, in service, in commitment and in the joy shared by the disciples.



In Canada each year, Life Ascending chooses a theme for groups to explore and enlarge on; for example during the three past years the themes have been : the sacraments, the parables, the mysteries of the Rosary.

During our meetings, based on texts from the Good News with commentaries by Spiritual Directors, we hold discussions and we pray, we communicate our feelings about the Word of God to each other. For us it is a means of deepening our faith and our spiritual life.

## **TRANSFORM THEIR CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT INTO CONCRETE ACTION WITHIN SOCIETY AND WITHIN THE CHURCH**

### **• Apostolate or Evangelisation**

Together with 'spirituality' and 'friendship', the word 'apostolate' is one of the key words which have defined the Life Ascending Movement since its beginning. To define what we call 'apostolate', we usually talk about our concern for others, the things we do for them, visiting the lonely and the sick , our participation in the actions or the organisation of works of charity. This is the tangible exercising of charity. But just as our movements are alive and active , so too do words evolve. Today, next to the word "apostolate", we place the word "evangelisation". Why?

Today we are aware of another need – just as important – that of sharing our faith. We feel the need as much within our families, with our children and our grand-children, as in society, where Christians are beginning to realise that they are in the minority. 'To evangelise' is to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ for the world : "*You will be my witnesses*" said Jesus. Today it is our responsibility. But it also involves a responsibility inherent in the life of our Movements.

This does not mean long speeches, nor large undertakings, but simply our everyday lives, our normal relationships - within the family, at work or at play, in our village or in our neighbourhood. Faith is not transmitted primarily by teaching and rules. It is passed on by the transmission of witness.. And this is where the apostolate, with its concrete actions, is a necessary sign. Otherwise our mere words would be empty. But in our secularised societies we are called on to go further : to learn to share our faith with others. So that our actions may be witnesses to Jesus Christ.

It's not about preaching about our faith, nor trying to make converts – but about not hiding what we believe in. It calls for courage, and developing a focussed spiritual life, developing our faith. But isn't that just exactly what the group does in our movements? If we study the Gospels together we find so many examples in them of conversations between God and man! We also find in them the meaning behind our behaviour towards our neighbour : to bring him the Good News of the love shown to us by Jesus Christ.



In Africa some members of Life Ascending take part in Church and community activities:

- Church : catechism, readings, distributing the Eucharist, choirs, caring for young people (teaching), godfather or godmother in the Catholic college, working on the pastoral or parochial council, producing the Seniors' newspaper
- Society : visits and help for orphans, the handicapped and prisoners , helping the elderly and people alone, working for a political party , local councillor or village chief

## • Commitment

This word first appeared during the last International Meeting of VMI in Canada in October 2010. But it goes back further than that in the life of groups in different countries. And not by chance : bit by bit we have all become aware of each one's responsibility for others in today's society where we are all so interdependent. It's a step towards a democratic conscience! In his last social

encyclical, "Love in Truth", Pope Benedict XVI talks about our responsibility for development and justice : *"Every Christian is called upon to live this charity, according to his vocation and his sphere of influence in his community."* (7). Life Ascending cannot remain outside this evolution. Especially since many of those who reach retirement today, if they stop working, take on various functions in their community : in associations, in local councils, in economic and even political life - even in the Church. It's not only about the tasks they undertake, which are important enough, but about their on-going commitment – their feeling of real responsibility. We can understand the meaning of this commitment for a Christian : it's an important way of showing practical charity, of showing the Church's social doctrine at work. We know the importance of the small kindnesses we are all called upon to carry out each day, individually or in a group. Today we are also aware of the importance of such acts in the life of a community.

We also find ourselves occasionally facing questions which concern elderly people and their families more directly, for example on health care, euthanasia, abortion, living standards, or even development and justice, as the Pope mentioned. How should we explain the Christian point of view, when there are so many differing opinions? Should a movement like Life Ascending sometimes have a public point of view? This would obviously demand sensitivity, through faith and charity, depending on the country and its situation. So many questions and not always an easy answer – but this is a good sign, it means that Life Ascending is part of a Church well and truly alive in the world of today ....



In Senegal, on the eve of the Presidential elections on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2012, the Church called on every Christian to live according to his beliefs and his sphere of influence in the service of the country and without violence or distrust as each one was capable of:

- reflecting on the dignity of the human person
- judging, based on everyone's innate capacity to judge
- rejecting all forms of violence

It is in this way that we can help to lead the group along the road to justice and peace, so much desired and sought for in our country at this time.

### 3 • A faith in dialogue

*VIE MONTANTE INTERNATIONALE*, following the recommendation of Vatican II, attaches particular importance to the ecumenical perspective. “Christians from other denominations, and even non-Christians, can be welcomed whenever possible without the identity of the movement being disguised or violated.” (Extract from VMI Statutes; art 6.6)

#### **ECUMENISM, A CONCERN FOR ALL CHRISTIANS**

The second Vatican Council reminded us that the ecumenical effort is not an exercise reserved for a few specialists. It is based on Our Lord’s prayer for unity among his disciples : “*That they may be one as We are one, so that the world will believe in them*”. We should understand first of all that unity is not imposed on us like a command from on high, as if we were incapable of enforcing it on ourselves.

So our first task for ecumenism must be to unite our prayer with Jesus’ prayer, to ask the Father Himself to bestow on us that unity which we are incapable of building for ourselves. This is more important than ever today. Wherever we are, in our villages and towns, we meet Christians from other denominations. Sometimes, and increasingly often, we all work together in teams or LA groups and we all feel the benefit of these meetings, the spiritual value they have for us all.

*What unites  
us is stronger  
than what  
separates us.*

We know that the divisions between us scandalise others and distort any evidence we try to give of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Each one of us, and each one of our groups, is involved in playing their part in the work of Christian Unity. It isn’t just a job for the Pope, or the bishops or a few specialists.

If we are lucky enough to belong to a “mixed” group we know that the important thing is not to depend on lots of discussions and debates but to listen to one another, to learn to know each other better, to recognise one another’s spiritual

heritage. And to learn to free ourselves from our prejudices. What unites us is stronger than what separates us. And the separations are not always where our prejudices might lead us to expect to find them! By each of us working together in the service of God's great plan for humanity – for peace, justice, equality and help for the poorest among us - we open to all men the energy that comes from the Gospels and which is the pride and joy of all Christ's disciples.



In Switzerland the movement has welcomed the ecumenical movement, in the Neuchâtel, area mostly protestant: it has two very active spiritual directors: an episcopal vicar and a pastor.

## INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Encounters between different religions have a different impact depending on each place and continent; in many countries of the world it's the norm among Christian communities. In Asia Christians are usually in the minority and may form a very small group. There are even some places where Christians are not trusted and may be ill-treated. They may be suspected of trying to convert others, of representing a foreign power. They may be publicly ill-treated, or tortured, or subtly prevented from taking part in the political life of the country, or from sharing the social responsibilities of their community.

Nowadays, thanks to the movement of so many people about the world, and the spread of the media, on every continent "globalisation" has brought about a great shuffling of religious believers so that everyone now has some knowledge of what others believe.

*"Globalisation" has brought about a great shuffling of religious believers.*

Almost 50 years ago, the Second Vatican Council was already aware of this development. The participants expressed their respect for those other religions which *"often bring a glimmer of the truth which enlightens all men"*. Over time a positive attitude towards communication and collaboration began to replace the old mood of shared suspicion and doubt. So it was, in 1986,

that John-Paul II invited the leaders of different world religions to meet in Assisi and pray for peace.

It is in the spirit of that conviction, founded by Vatican II, that all the members and groups of Life Ascending are moving forward today in their inter-religious encounters. It isn't a question of "mixing" or blurring anything – what is called "syncretism" – but for a mutual respect for each one's beliefs, for a recognition of each one's common values, for an effort in collaborating together so as to combine what the faithful can contribute to peace and brotherhood among mankind.

## 4 • Sharing communities : the basic groups

The movement proposes that members meet in small groups to reflect on and discuss the meaning of this stage of life; so as to respond to the vocation of the laity in the world and in the Church.

### **THE FORMATION OF GROUPS**

There is no one model. Some groups are formed through the initiative of one or two people in a parish, a village, an area.... .. Others are started from contacts among friends : travel, outings, among neighbours, sports meetings... Non-Catholics, and Non-Christians, can take part too. Diversity can be a plus. The important thing is that genuine communication exists among all the members. Each must feel at ease and free to speak.

### **AIM OF MEETINGS**

Meetings must be a place of on-going development, and support for the personal and joint commitments of members.

The movement usually proposes an annual theme, which eases and stimulates discussion within the groups, and makes for consolidation within the movement.

The meetings can consist of several parts:

- Time for friendly exchanges
- Time for reflection
- Sharing the Word
- Time for prayer

Groups must take care to keep in touch with isolated persons who cannot - or can no longer- take part in meetings (sick, handicapped....) to allow them to share in the discussions that take place and show them friendly support.

## **ANIMATING THE MEETINGS**

A lay 'group leader' leads the meeting. His / her role is to welcome, facilitate discussion and make sure everyone has the chance to speak.

The meeting will be prepared by the leader together with one or two members of the Group. Besides the theme of year, topics are chosen according to the ages, needs and preoccupations of the members and current happenings.

We must be aware of the need to remain in touch with our Christian faith.

## **RUNNING THE MEETINGS**

The success of a meeting depends on the atmosphere of friendship and confidence. Listening, tolerance and discretion encourage true sharing. Meetings should not involve too many members. Ten to fifteen people make for easy discussion. In addition, it's better to split into several groups.

As well as the regular meetings, days of recollection and outings can be organised and various meetings with groups who are geographically close. More opportunities for open-minded discussion. ■

# Further readings

## **Texts of John-Paul II**

Familiaris consortio (1981)

Message at the assembly of UNO on ageing (1982)

Laïci fideles (1989)

Letter to older people (1999)

Homily of the Jubilee (Rome 2000)

At the beginning of the new millennium (2001)

Message at the II° global assembly on ageing  
(Vienne 2002)

Message for the Lent 2005

**Benedict XVI** : Charity in truth

## **Pontifical Council for the laity**

Dignity and Mission of Older People in the Church  
and in the World (1999)

In every country we shall also find the documents of the national  
episcopate

# Notes

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