

A Gift and a Blessing

Pope Leo XIV used these words to describe the elderly during a meeting with participants of the Second International Congress on the Pastoral Care of the Elderly, organized in early October at the Vatican by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life. The congress's timing was itself symbolic: it began on the liturgical commemoration of the Holy Guardian Angels and concluded on the day dedicated to Saint Francis of Assisi. I am convinced that this body of saints fulfills a special mission in the Church, protecting the dignity and lives of the most vulnerable. Among them are the elderly, who face both the fragility of health and the challenges of old age, but also the wisdom of life.

The testimonies of the participants at the Vatican congress highlighted both the positive and negative aspects of aging in the modern world. Among the worrying phenomena were loneliness, technological and economic exclusion (the culture of rejection), suffering, suicidal thoughts, and loss of faith in God. Fortunately, these observations are accompanied by some encouraging signs: for the first time in human history, life expectancy is increasing, and the elderly are no longer so much a "social problem" as a source of hope for the Church ("the young of old"), an integral part of the People of God on their journey, "an integral part of the miracle that we all are," to use the words of Pope Leo XIV.

These perspectives on old age encourage the Church community to develop a pastoral care for the elderly that responds to their real needs, above all in a spirit of evangelization and mission. The elderly are not merely the objects of the Church's targeted action, but its subjects, fully rooted in their baptismal dignity, capable of giving themselves, especially to young people, through intergenerational dialogue and the transmission of values, always guided by the Good News of Jesus Christ.

During the aforementioned audience for congress participants, the Holy Father emphasized that it is the elderly who most often participate in the liturgy and lead parish activities, catechesis, and other pastoral services. He therefore encouraged the elderly to engage not as mere passive recipients of evangelization, but as active participants, so as to respond with them—and not in their place—to the questions posed by life and the Gospel. This dynamic, rather than passive, approach to pastoral care for the elderly aligns with the reflections of the Synod, whose key concepts are shared responsibility and participation, and the unity of the gifts and charisms of all believers, regardless of age; always with the aim of fulfilling the mission of communicating the truth about Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

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