

Interview Anna Gorzelana with Father Roman Chromy, Spiritual advisor of the European coordination of VMI

The experience of seniors is something worth drawing from in the Church

For some, it's the end of their lives, for others, a new beginning. Father Roman Chromy, pastor of the Divine Mercy Parish in Pszczyna, discusses the role of older people in the parish and why the Church cannot forget about them. This priest combines his experience as a parish priest with his commitment to the elderly. Anna Gorzelana speaks with him.

Currently, Father Roman Chromy serves as parish priest, and the topic of aging and accompanying seniors holds particular pastoral significance for him. He emphasizes that he strives to gradually incorporate the experience of working with the international seniors' association into parish life, building bridges between generations and demonstrating the value of adulthood in the Church.

Previously involved with the Mouvement Chrétien des Retraités (a Christian movement for seniors), he currently serves as the spiritual advisor in Western Europe for the Catholic association Vie Montante Internationale (VMI)—an international community that promotes a positive perspective on old age, associated not so much with "sunset" but with "the dawn of a new day." He notes that his experience working with older people has reinforced his belief that old age can be the beginning of a new phase of engagement and development, both personally and as a community.

>>> "Let us be signs of hope – at every age." Message for the 5th World Day of Grandparents and Older Persons

Anna Gorzelana (misyjne.pl): We're talking ahead of World Grandparents' Day, which, starting in 2021, is celebrated on the last Sunday of July – this year, the day after the commemoration of St. Anne and Joachim, the apocryphal grandparents of Jesus. Do you think this emphasis changes the Church's approach to older people?

"Since Pope Francis established World Grandparents' Day and the Elderly, it's worth accepting his decision as an expression of pastoral discernment. In my opinion, the Holy Father, thanks to his advisors, has a broader, global perspective on the Church. Therefore, it's worth considering the papal intuitions as a call to reflect on the state of pastoral care for seniors in the Polish context."

There's no doubt that contact with seniors in parishes is closely linked to their involvement in prayer and formation groups, sometimes even charismatic ones. However, I think that nationwide, there's a lack of a comprehensive perspective on senior ministry that would allow for its proper systematization and development. You asked if the Papal Day for Grandparents and the Elderly can make a real difference in our approach to older adults. I'm convinced it already has. While we don't have well-developed Catholic seniors' associations in the Polish Church, such associations have been very active for years in France, Portugal, and Spain. Furthermore, those involved reflect not only on what can be done for seniors but also on what seniors can offer to society, especially in the intergenerational dimension. After all, older people have a wealth of life, professional, and spiritual experience.

How has the role of seniors in the Church changed over the years? Pope Francis strongly emphasized this context.

"Pope Francis called himself a grandfather. His autobiographical books and statements reflected on aging, marked by suffering and the limitations of age. Although he sensed that his life was slowly drawing to a close, the Holy Father carried out his mission in the Church perfectly. In this way, he demonstrated that the role of older people in the Church is invaluable. One need only analyze his messages addressed to grandparents and the elderly to see how deeply this social group was close to his heart."

The situation of older people varies depending on the continent and country.

European society is aging on the one hand, and life expectancy is increasing on the other. Older people often lack adequate care and support, experiencing loneliness and abandonment. In economically disadvantaged countries, seniors are deprived of adequate medical care and educational support, even in the area of new technologies. These contexts require analysis and concrete decisions. In January 2020, the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life organized an international congress in Rome devoted to the importance of seniors and their pastoral challenges. Bishop Wiesław Szlachetka recently became the delegate of the Polish Episcopal Conference for Pastoral Care of the Elderly. Without a doubt, the goal of such activities is primarily to revitalize pastoral initiatives for and with the participation of older people. With 44 dioceses and over 10,000 parishes in Poland, the potential for focused pastoral care for seniors is unimaginable. This raises the question of the extent to which we draw on the rich experience of people of third age.

>>> According to St. Camillus, without mercy one is like a fish without water
[INTERVIEW]

What is this wealth? What can older people pass on to younger people?

"Seniors are not only the object of pastoral ministry, but above all, they become its subjects. Therefore, older people can successfully share their talents and abilities with others. Their rich experience encompasses three fundamental areas: life experience, professional experience, and religious experience. The former is connected to the historical dimension of each person's life, their personal identity, origin, family, and multigenerational tradition. Seniors have already experienced a lot, gaining practical knowledge along the way. They have also experienced retirement. They have ended their professional careers. Parish priests, if they look carefully around, will successfully find among the seniors exceptionally competent, educated, and practical people who can serve the community with knowledge, advice, and action. Catholic seniors' associations I've met, for example, collaborate with retired doctors who advise on how seniors should take care of their mental and physical health." As part of the senior community meetings at the parish where I currently serve, we benefited from the expertise of a doctor who gave a lecture during Lent on the medical aspects of Jesus' death on the cross. The meeting was very well received. We also have many seniors with legal or management experience. We can't wait to use their support.

And the third dimension of experience – religious life?

"We all count on the prayers of seniors. They provide spiritual support not only to their loved ones but also to the parish communities in which they live. I admire the elderly who come to church every day, often even an hour before Mass, and pray in silence. They quietly affirm their deep faith and living relationship with the Lord Jesus. These individuals constitute a real spiritual support group for their families, priests, and parishioners. Seniors willingly dedicate their time to their grandchildren, but many also actively participate in parish life. I am personally pleased that the core of the parish Caritas team in my parish is made up of elderly people who know the local community and cooperate seamlessly with local government aid institutions. They care for the sick, the lonely, and often for their neighbours and good friends. Works of mercy give our spirituality the greatest credibility."

Young people want to get involved, and you provided concrete examples of how to build collaboration with older people. Finally, let me ask: how can we talk to young people about seniors, neighbors, and grandparents so that they truly open their eyes and hearts to them?

"I recently spoke with an elderly parishioner. She was talking about her daily chores around the house. She mentioned that she had asked her grandchildren to mow the lawn. She had difficulty finding a volunteer for this task. Following Pope Leo's encouragement in his Message for the Fifth World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly, I invite our young friends to "actively participate in the 'revolution' of gratitude and care (...), which can give hope and dignity to those who feel forgotten." During World Youth Day in Krakow in 2016, the current pope's predecessor invited young people to put on comfortable hiking boots, get up from the couch, and reach out to those in need. Seniors are certainly among them. They need our support, tenderness, and closeness. They crave the presence of others. It's worth responding to this desire, because none of us—regardless of age—will be saved alone. We always go to heaven with another person.

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