

Interview with Vittorio Scelzo, head of pastoral care for the elderly at the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life.



Old age is not a burden to be managed, but a gift to be preserved.

"It is not enough to organize services; we must build relationships." Thus, "the certainty of not being forgotten by God" translates into "the daily experience of not being forgotten by one's parish and family." This is how Vittorio Scelzo—an official at the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life responsible for pastoral care for the elderly—assesses the situation with Vatican media six years after the establishment of the World Day dedicated to the elderly. This year, it is celebrated on Sunday, July 26—the feast of Saints Joachim and Anne, parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary and, in other words, "the grandparents of Jesus."

The World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly is now in its sixth edition. How would you assess the progress made so far?

In recent years, this Day has established itself as a key event in the life of the Church. Born as a response to the isolation imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, it has given a more global dimension to reflection on old age. The goal was never merely to celebrate a specific day, but to develop a genuine pastoral approach to the elderly—one capable of moving beyond a view of old age reduced to mere caregiving. The elderly person, no longer just a recipient of charitable services, becomes an active participant in pastoral life. Older people constitute a significant part of the People of God, and it is essential to offer them the pastoral attention they deserve. The long-term challenge lies in transforming this awareness into standard practice by embedding it within the formation paths of ecclesial communities.

The theme chosen by Leo XIV, "I will never forget you" (Is 49:15), calls to mind God's closeness and the community's commitment to the elderly, especially the most isolated among them. What concrete perspectives does this message open up?

Isaiah's words open up very interesting perspectives. First, they call for overcoming what Pope Francis termed the "culture of waste," urging communities to step out and reach out to the elderly. In an age where human worth is measured by productivity, those who lose their strength or memory risk feeling forgotten. Leo XIV adds that "God's love, which forgets no one, is the answer to the anonymity in which human life can otherwise be lost." This message reminds us that the Church's mission is to make this divine "not forgetting" visible and tangible—echoing the encyclical **Magnifica humanitas**. It is not enough to merely affirm the dignity of the elderly in words; we must go out to meet them, drawing close through a visit or an embrace. Concretely, the Pope asks us to visit the elderly. This invitation holds particular importance at this time of year, marked by summer heat and a loneliness that is often more acute than at other times. This may appear—and indeed is—a call for social attentiveness; yet experience teaches us that such closeness will remain merely an isolated gesture until the elderly are truly placed at the heart of ecclesial life. Only then will it become clear to all just how precious their presence is: not a burden to be managed, but a gift to be cherished. At an operational level, this means the community must address loneliness—a genuine form of poverty among the elderly. It is not enough to organize services; relationships must be built. As we often reiterate within the Dicastery, the challenge lies in moving "from assistance to existence" through life projects that allow the elderly

person to feel like an integral part of a communal "us." The certainty of not being forgotten by God must be translated into the daily experience of not being forgotten by one's parish and family.

In recent years, you have gathered significant experience within dioceses and parishes. Are there any best practices or particularly successful initiatives that demonstrate a growing sensitivity toward the elderly?

Yes, the Dicastery's ongoing monitoring reveals a very vibrant pastoral creativity, with responses that vary according to geographical context. In many Latin American dioceses, liturgical celebrations are intertwined with devotion to Saint Anne. In Venezuela, pastoral care for the elderly is making a special effort to ensure that the message "I will never forget you" reaches all elderly people affected by the earthquake. There is no shortage of initiatives in Asia and Africa, either. Some are using this Day to place the elderly back at the heart of ecclesial life; the Diocese of Kampala, in Uganda, likely offers the most numerous and extensive range of activities. In India, meanwhile, it is young people who, over the years, have launched social media campaigns to promote this Day. One practice becoming widespread—and which we have strongly supported—is visiting elderly people who live alone. Many parishes have organized actual rosters of visitors to keep them company. In Europe, notable examples include "intergenerational alliance" projects, where young people and the elderly share moments of prayer or leisure, thereby bridging a generational divide that ultimately impoverishes both groups. When the elderly person regains their place at the heart of the community, the entire community benefits.

The Holy Father calls for closeness to the elderly to become a standard way of life within the Church—something not limited to just a single day. What are the main challenges that must be met to achieve this?

Above all, a shift in mindset is required—not only from society but also from the elderly themselves. We cannot accept a situation where people live—or are left to live—for twenty or thirty years without purpose or mission. Old age is a season of life that must discover its own spirituality; it is not merely an empty span of time to be filled or managed while awaiting the end. Nor can we pretend it does not exist and carry on as if time had stood still. Pope Francis himself, addressing the elderly directly in his message, offers a clear encouragement: "Do not be afraid of frailty!" He explains that this weakness, when embraced, opens the heart to prayer and becomes a vocation in itself. The mission the Pope specifically entrusts to the elderly serves as a tangible sign of this: uniting with him in persistent prayer for peace to come quickly to the world. It is a vocation, not a spiritual retirement.

Pastoral resources, the official prayer, and other materials have been prepared to accompany this Day. Who are they for, and how can they help communities experience this event in a practical way?

The materials provided—known as the "pastoral kit" and available on the Dicastery's website—are tools designed to assist ecclesial communities in their work. The proposal is intentionally simple: celebrate Mass with the elderly—ideally in the cathedral—and visit those living alone within the community. These are very practical guidelines: in keeping with this year's theme, the aim is to leave no one behind, meaning visits should also be made to the elderly who are bedridden or unable to participate in communal activities. For them, too, this Day is a call to renewal and to take seriously the Pope's request to intercede for peace.