



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

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[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Old Age: 4. Fairwell and inheritance: memory and testimony

Dear brothers and sisters, good day!

In the Bible, the account of the death of the elderly Moses is preceded by his spiritual testament, called the “Canticle of Moses”. This Song is first and foremost a beautiful confession of faith, and it goes like this: “For I will proclaim the name of the Lord / Ascribe greatness to our God! / The Rock, his work is perfect; / for all his ways are justice. / A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, / just and right is he” (Deut 32:3-4). But it is also the memory of the history lived with God, of the adventures of the people formed from faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And thus, Moses also remembers the bitterness and disappointments of God himself: His faithfulness continually put to the test by the infidelities of His people. The faithful God and the response of the unfaithful people: as if the people wanted to put God’s fidelity to the test. And He remains always faithful, close to His people. This, precisely, is the core of the Song of Moses: God’s fidelity, which accompanies us throughout our whole life.

When Moses pronounces this confession of faith, he is on the threshold of the promised land, and also of his departure from life. He was one hundred and twenty years old, the account notes, “but his eye was not dim” (Deut 34:7). That capacity to see, to really see, also to see symbolically, as the elderly do, who are able to see things, [to see] the most radical significance of things. The vitality of his gaze is a precious gift: it enables him to hand down the legacy of his long experience

of life and faith, with the necessary clarity. Moses sees history and passes on history; the elderly see history and pass on history.

An old age that is granted this clarity is a precious gift for the generation that is to follow. Listening personally and directly to the story of lived faith, with all its highs and lows, is irreplaceable. Reading about it in books, watching it in films, consulting it on the internet, however useful it may be, will never be the same thing. This “handing down” — which is true and proper *tradition*, the concrete transmission from the old to the young! — this handing down is sorely lacking today for the new generations, an absence that continues to grow. Why? Because this new civilization has the idea that the old are waste material, the old should be discarded. This is brutal! No, it mustn't be like that. There is a tone and style of communication to direct, person-to-person storytelling, that no other medium can replace. An older person, one who has lived a long time, and receives the gift of a lucid and passionate testimony of his or her history, is an irreplaceable blessing. Are we capable of recognising and honouring this gift of the elderly? Does the transmission of faith — and of the meaning of life — follow this path of listening to the elderly, today? I can give a personal testimony. I learned hatred and anger for war from my grandfather, who fought at the Piave in 1914, and he passed on to me this rage for war. Because he told me about the suffering of a war. And this isn't learned in books or in other ways... it's learned in this way, being passed down from grandparents to grandchildren. And this is irreplaceable. The transmission of life experience from grandparents to grandchildren. Today, unfortunately, this is not the case, and we think that grandparents are discarded material: No! They are the living memory of a people, and young people and children ought to listen to their grandparents.

In our culture, which is so “politically correct”, this path seems to be hindered in many ways: in the family, in society, in the Christian community itself. Some even propose abolishing the teaching of history, as superfluous information about worlds that are no longer relevant, which takes resources away from knowledge of the present. As if we were born yesterday!

The transmission of faith, on the other hand, often lacks the passion of a “lived history”. To hand on the faith is not just to say things, “bla, bla, bla”. No! It is to speak about the experience of faith. And so, how can it draw people to choose love forever, fidelity to the given word, perseverance in dedication, compassion for wounded and disheartened faces? Of course, the stories of life must be transformed into testimony, and the testimony must be faithful. An ideology that bends history to its own schemes is certainly not faithful; propaganda that adapts history to promote its own group is not faithful; it is not faithful to turn history into a tribunal in which the past is condemned and any future is discouraged. To be faithful is to tell history as it is; and only those who have lived it can tell it well. This is why it is very important to listen to the elderly, to listen to grandparents. It is important that children converse with them.

The Gospels themselves tell the blessed story of Jesus honestly, without hiding the mistakes, misunderstandings, and even betrayals of the disciples. This is history, it is the truth, this is

witness. This is the gift of memory that the “elders” of the Church pass on, right from the beginning, passing it on “from hand to hand” to the generation that follows. It will do us good to ask ourselves: How much do we value this way of transmitting the faith, the passing on of the baton from the elders of the community to young people who are opening up to the future? And here something comes to mind that I have said many times, but that I want to repeat: How is the faith handed on? “Ah, here’s a book, study it”. No. Faith can’t be handed on like that. Faith is passed on in dialect, that is, in familiar speech, between grandparents and grandchildren, between parents and their children. The faith is always handed on in dialect, in that familiar dialect and experience learned through the years. This is the reason dialogue in a family is so important, the dialogue of children with their grandparents, who are the ones who have the wisdom of the faith.

Sometimes I reflect on this strange anomaly. Today, the catechism of Christian initiation generously draws on the Word of God and conveys accurate information on dogmas, the morals of the faith, and the sacraments. What is often lacking, however, is a knowledge of the Church that comes from listening to and witnessing the real history of the faith and the life of the Church community, from the beginning to the present day. As children we learn the Word of God in catechism classes; but the Church is learned, as young people, in the classrooms and in the global information media.

The narration of the history of faith should be like the Canticle of Moses, like the testimony of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. In other words, a story capable of recalling God’s blessings with emotion and our failings with sincerity. It would be a good thing if the courses in catechesis were to include, from the very beginning, the habit of listening to the lived experience of the elderly, to the candid confession of the blessings received from God, which we must cherish, and to the faithful testimony of our own failures of fidelity, which we must repair and correct. The elderly enter the promised land, which God desires for every generation, when they offer to the young the beautiful initiation of their witness and pass on the story of the faith, the faith, in dialect, that familiar dialect, that dialect of the old to the young. Then, guided by the Lord Jesus, the old and the young together enter into his Kingdom of life and love. But all together. Everyone in the family, with this great treasure that is the faith passed on in dialect. Thank you.

Special Greetings:

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s Audience, especially the groups from England, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and the United States of America. May our Lenten journey bring us to celebrate Easter with hearts purified and renewed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Upon each of you, and your families, I invoke joy and peace in Christ our Redeemer.

I would like to take a minute to remember the victims of the war. The news of displaced persons, of people fleeing, of people killed, people wounded, of so many soldiers fallen on both sides, is news of death. Let us ask the Lord of life to deliver us from this death of war: with war everything is lost, everything. There is no victory in a war: everything is defeated. May the Lord send His Spirit to make us understand that war is a defeat of humanity, to make us understand that instead we need to defeat war. May the Spirit of the Lord free us all from this self-destructive need that is manifested in waging war. Let us also pray that leaders may understand that buying weapons and making weapons is not the solution to the problem. The solution is to work together for peace and, as the Bible says, to turn weapons into instruments for peace. Let us pray together to Our Lady: *Hail Mary...*

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *the sick*, to *young people* and to *newlyweds*. May the Solemnity of the Annunciation, which we will celebrate the day after tomorrow, be for each of you an invitation to follow the example of the Mother of God and may this turn into generous availability to the call of the Father, who urges all of us to be leaven for the edification of a just and solidary society.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on the meaning and value of old age, viewed in the light of God's word, we now turn to the special vocation of the elderly to hand on to new generations their personal experience of the Church's faith. At the end of the exodus, the aged Moses hands down in a magnificent song his own long experience of faith in the Lord who remains ever faithful to his promises. This "handing on" of the experience of faith is the essence of the living Tradition of the People of God. In our own day, the Church's efforts to evangelize, catechize, transmit and explain her faith certainly takes place with the aid of books, films and other resources, yet nothing can replace the direct person-to-person testimony of a life-long experience of closeness to God in faith. In a world that at times seeks to cancel aspects of history and culture, or replace truth with fake news or propaganda, we greatly need the wisdom and experience of the elderly to help new generations know the Church from the inside, to live lives of fidelity to God's word, to persevere in hope amid trials, and to show compassionate love for all our brothers and sisters. May we value this precious vocation of the elderly as we cherish the gifts of the past and look forward to the fulfilment of God's promises in the coming of his Kingdom.

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