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Press Conference to present the Document of the Pontifical Academy for Life: "Old age: our future. The condition of the elderly after the pandemic"

Intervention of Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia

Intervention of Msgr. Bruno-Marie Duffé

Intervention of Professor Etsuo Akiba

At 11.30 this morning, in live streaming from the "John Paul II Hall" of the Holy See Press Office, a press conference took place to present the Document of the Pontifical Academy for Life: "Old age: our future. The condition of the elderly after the pandemic".

The speakers were: Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life; Msgr. Bruno-Marie Duffé, secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; and Professor Etsuo Akiba, lecturer at the University of Toyama, Japan, ordinary Academician of the Pontifical Academy for Life, in live link from the Japanese city.

The following are their interventions:

Intervention of Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia

First of all, allow me to thank Pope Francis for the institution of the "World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly" which will be celebrated every year on July 25 on the feast of Saints Joachim and Anna. That is an invitation to believers to grow in them and around them a new sensitivity and care towards grandparents and the elderly. Several times the last popes have spoken in order to draw everyone's attention to the elderly. Suffice it to recall

the *Letter to the Elders* of Saint John Paul II, some precious speeches by Benedict XVI and the intense Magisterium of Pope Francis with the unforgettable feast of the elderly held in Rome in 2017. The Pope who never ceases to combat that "culture of waste" which leads to abandoning the elderly, urges us in every way to take care of the affective network that unites the generations, so that the family and the Christian community may be a welcoming home for everyone, from children to grandparents, and the transmission of culture and faith between generations may be flowing and alive.

With this Note, the Academy for Life intends to underline the urgency of a new attention to elderly people who in recent decades have increased in numbers everywhere. There hasn't been, however, an increased closeness to them or an adequate understanding of the great demographic revolution of these last decades. The COVID-19 pandemic – whose most numerous victims have been the elderly – has revealed this inability of contemporary society to take proper care of its elderly. With the pandemic, that "throwaway" culture that Pope Francis has repeatedly recalled has caused countless tragedies among the elderly. On all continents, the pandemic has primarily affected those who are old. The death tolls are brutal in their cruelty. To date, there is talk of more than two million and three hundred thousand elderly people who have died from Covid-19, the majority of whom were over 75. A real "massacre of the elderly". And the majority of them died in institutions for the elderly. Data from some countries – for example Italy – show that half of the elderly victims of Covid-19 came from institutions and residential care homes, while only 24 percent of overall deaths concern the elderly who lived at home. In short, 50% of deaths occurred among the approximately 300,000 guests of nursing homes, while only 24% affected the 7 million elderly over 75 who lived at home. On equal terms, their home, even during the pandemic, protected them much more. And all this took place in Europe and in many other parts of the world. A research by Tel Aviv University on European countries has highlighted the direct proportional relationship between the number of beds in nursing homes and the number of elderly deaths. This proportion remains the same in each country: as the number of beds increases, the number of victims in the elderly population also increases. I don't think that's a coincidence. However, what happened prevents the question of caring for the elderly from being dismissed with the immediate search for scapegoats, for individual culprits. On the other hand, a guilty and suspicious silence would be incomprehensible.

It is necessary to globally rethink society's closeness to the elderly. Much needs to be reviewed in the care system for the elderly. The institutionalization of the elderly in nursing homes, in every country, has not necessarily guaranteed elderly people, especially those who are weaker, better conditions of care. A serious rethinking is needed not only in relation to residences for the elderly but for the entire care system of the numerous elderly population that today characterizes all societies. Pope Francis recalled that we won't emerge from the pandemic as we were before: either we will be better or we will be worse. That depends on us, on the way we start building our future today. This Note – the third issued by the Academy in relation to the pandemic – aims to help build a new future for the elderly in society.

It is the Church's responsibility to take on a prophetic vocation pointing to the dawn of a new time. We cannot fail to commit ourselves to a deep vision able to guide the care of the third and fourth age. We owe it to our elders, to all those who will become so in the years to come. The level of civilization of an era is measured by the way we treat those who are weaker and more fragile. The death and suffering of the oldest cannot fail to be a call to do better, to do differently, to do more. We owe it to our children, to those who are young and at the beginning of life: educating to the life of the Gospel also means teaching that weakness – even that of the elderly – is not a curse but a way to encounter God in the face of Jesus Christ. Through the eyes of the Gospel frailty can become a strength and an instrument of evangelization.

Within a new and evolving world, the Church, teacher of life, will have to increasingly reinterpret its vocation to be a role model and a beacon for many families and for society as a whole so that aging people are supported and helped in their stay at home and in any case they are never abandoned.

In His Apostolic Exhortation "Cristus vivit", following the Synod of Bishops on young people, vocation and discernment, the Holy Father recalls the testimony of a young auditor of the Synod itself, from the Samoa Islands.

This young man, says the Holy Father, speaks of the Church as a "canoe, in which the elders help keep the course by interpreting the position of the stars and the young people row hard by imagining what awaits them further on". (*Cristus vivit*, 201).

This beautiful comparison of the Church as a canoe can also be applied to society. For if, as we progress along the often tumultuous river of our history, we lose the advice of our elders, we risk losing our memory. And by losing memory, we also lose hope (cf. the book "The wisdom of time - in dialogue with Pope Francis on the great questions of life" - edited by Antonio Spadaro, Venice, 2018) (*Cristus vivit*, 196).

The elderly are our memory and, consequently, they are, paradoxically, our hope. If we draw on their experience and their discoveries, we can continue the adventure of human history. Indeed, with memory, hope is possible. The paradox, then, is this: the elderly are always one step ahead. They have already passed through the places we are passing through and can tell us what certain experiences we are having for the first time will produce.

It is clear that each person must walk his or her own path, because, as St Augustine says, 'the path exists only because you walk it'. The path is, therefore, the parable of human existence, but we are never alone along the way: the elderly can advise us and the younger ones can encourage us.

The technocratic culture, which places immediate effectiveness at the center of thought and life, often leads us to abandon older people, to consider them less 'productive'. Moreover, there are industrial companies in which people in their fifties are considered elderly and sometimes even dismissed, for the benefit of younger, more "aggressive" people... Individualism, which Pope Francis, in His latest encyclical "Fratelli tutti", considers to be the thinking of a closed and egocentric world, is part of this culture in which there is no need for others: there is no need for the elderly, there is no need for those who go slower. In this culture, the elderly are, by definition, 'people at the end of their tether'.

This has two consequences: the elderly, who no longer participate directly in the processes of economic production, are no longer considered a priority in our society. And, in the context of the current epidemic, they are taken care of after others, after the 'productive' people, even if they are more fragile. The order of access to emergency care has shown, more than once, that they have been unable to benefit from life-support treatment. The other aspect of this same consequence is the breaking of the link between generations: children and young people can no longer meet the elderly, who are kept in close confinement. This sometimes leads to real psychological disorders in some children or young people who need to be with their grandparents, just as grandparents need to be with their grandchildren, otherwise they will die of another virus: grief.

We can therefore say that the health emergency has brought to light an important component of social relationships. The ability to take up the challenge of life - its unknowns and its joys - is based, in part, on the inspiration of dialogue between generations: a dialogue that can be made up of words or silence, of the drawing offered by a child, which still makes the elderly person dream, or the tenderness of their gazes, which meet and encourage each other.

Dreaming and tenderness: that's what it's all about. If the elderly continue to dream, the younger can continue to invent. If the older person's gaze gently encourages the younger person's projects, both will live in the hope that overcomes fears. Then the word of the prophet Joel can be fulfilled: 'your sons and daughters shall become prophets, and your elders shall dream'. All those educators and pastors who made children meet the elderly, know that those children have never forgotten that encounter: ... with a farmer, a fisherman, an artist, an inventor, a street beggar or a religious in his monastery. The old man, after all, has only one thing to do: to offer what he has discovered about life, so that the child still - and always - experiences the desire to discover and invent life.

What will be left of this terrible experience of a disease that has affected all ages and all peoples? Some, having experienced the suffering of separation, relearn within the family the bond of listening and caring between generations. Others keep within themselves, in intimate silence and with sadness, a glance and the regret of not having spoken more with those who have left. We all understand that older people offer us their memory, starting from the "fragility of clay pots" - as the Apostle Paul suggests. In the treasure of memory there is indeed faith, received and offered: that taste of eternal life that has already begun. For this reason, the generations, shaking hands in a gesture of shared affection, offer each other knowledge and dreams: a hope that cannot die because it is a gift from God.

Intervention of Professor Etsuo Akiba

A personal reflection from Japan:

the most aging country with a declining birthrate in the world

Because of the rapid escalation of the infection since last December, the number of deaths in the Covid-19 has risen to more than 6,000 in Japan. Elderly people of 60 years and over account for 98% of all deaths. Now in Tokyo, the number of the deaths out of hospitals is drastically increasing. But Japanese media don't report the actual condition of the deaths of elderly, the personal episode, where and how they died. The grief of the grandchildren and family members who lost their loved one is not shared in the general public. In the background of the indifference of the public to the deaths of elderly, there is serious discrimination against infectious disease patients and also the division of generation due to the nuclearization of the family after WWII. The self-determination thought based on strict individualism is underlying.

As for the young generation, the trend is to crowd into a narrow central metro area, to live and work in a skyscraper building. Their school life is dominated by deviation-value-oriented education. They have to engage in keen competition within their closed circle. Bullying in the classroom is widespread. The losers often go into seclusion, sometimes for long years, and at worst, commit suicide. Now under this pandemic, the number of suicide by female students is increasing. As for the elder generation, they move to the suburbs and live in the apartment designed for the elderly independently of their children. Their biggest fear is agnosia, incapability of cognition. Their trend is to make the "*Ending Note*" rejecting terminal medicine before they lost their ability of self-determination. Both generations are each other non intervention. Self-determination of the each generation and self-help efforts are crucial.

On the other side, some depopulated and aging provincial cities, but being blessed with abundant natural resources and keeping Japanese traditional religious culture, have been earnestly trying to create the regional community of mutual aid, rejecting the segregation of the generation. For example, Toyama prefecture along the Japan Sea, called discriminately "the reverse side of Japan" with much snow, is promoting "*Compact City Project*" toward the inter-generational symbiosis in cooperation with our university and the landscape gardening industry. Also "*Toyama Day Care System*" introduced by one retired nurse 30 years ago, has grown up to the national project. Elder persons and handicapped children live together in the Japanese traditional big house designed for a three-generation household situated in the rich natural grounds, supported by family members and various care persons. The remarkable case that the condition of children with ADHD turned better in the house could be reported.

Not only the regional community, Japanese need to create the cognitive moral community as well. For that, we have to overcome our trauma, the lost of Japanese common ethics rooted in *State Shintoism* before WW2. Not to return to narrow-minded nationalism, but we need to delve more deeply into its roots, to trace our national ethics back to its ultimate origin, the supreme common good shared by all human beings. The present World War against Covid-19 is a rare chance for us to escape from an island country's seclusive mentality and to get the cosmopolitan perspective. Now developing *Global Bioethics*, promoted by PAV, that could be traced back to the very common beginning, the Creator of the Universe, could be its powerful tool. Also it could be a tool for the

missionary work. In fact, it is common history that not a few intellectual elder persons have been baptized in Japan.
