

## The family - 7. The Grandparents

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,* In today's catechesis we continue our reflection on grandparents, *considering the value and importance of their role in the family.* I do so by placing myself in their shoes, because I too belong to this age group.

When I was in the Philippines, the Filipino people greeted me saying "Lolo Kiko" — meaning Grandpa Francis — "Lolo Kiko", they said! The first important thing to stress: it is true that society tends to discard us, but the Lord definitely does not! The Lord never discards us. He calls us to follow Him in every age of life, and *old age has a grace and a mission* too, a true vocation from the Lord. Old age is a vocation. It is not yet time to "pull in the oars". This period of life is different from those before, there is no doubt; we even have to somewhat "invent it ourselves", because our societies are not ready, spiritually and morally, to appreciate the true value of this stage of life. Indeed, it once was not so normal to have time available; it is much more so today. Christian spirituality has also been caught somewhat by surprise, with regard to outlining a kind of spirituality of the elderly. But thanks be to God there is no shortage of the testimony of elderly saints, both men and women!

I was really moved by the "Day dedicated to the elderly" that we had here in St Peter's Square last year, the Square was full. I listened to the stories of elderly people who devote themselves to others, and to stories of married couples, who said: "We are celebrating our 50th wedding anniversary, we are celebrating our 60th wedding anniversary". It is important to present this to young people who tire so easily; the testimony of the elderly in fidelity is important. There were so many in this Square that day. It is a reflection to continue, in both the ecclesial and civil spheres. The Gospel comes to meet us with a really moving and encouraging image. It is the image of Simeon and Anna, whom are spoken of in the Gospel of Jesus' childhood, composed by St Luke. There were certainly elderly, the "old man", Simeon, and the "prophetess", Anna, who was 84 years old. This woman did not hide her age. The Gospel says that they awaited the coming of God every day, with great trust, for many years. They truly wanted to see Him that day, to grasp the signs, to understand the origin. By then, they were also perhaps more resigned to die first: that long wait, however, continued to occupy their whole life, having no commitments more important than this: to await the Lord and pray. So, when Mary and Joseph went to the temple to fulfil the provisions of the Law, Simeon and Anna moved quickly, inspired by the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 2:27). The burden of age and waiting disappeared in an instant. They recognized the Child, and discovered *new strength, for a new task*: to give thanks for and bear witness to this Sign from God. Simeon improvised a beautiful hymn of jubilation (cf. Lk 2:29-32) — in that moment he was a poet — and Anna became the first woman to preach of Jesus: she "spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Lk 2:38).

Dear grandparents, dear elderly, let us follow in the footsteps of these extraordinary elders! Let us too become like poets of prayer: let us develop a taste for finding our own words, let us once again grasp those which teach us the Word of God. *The prayer of grandparents and of the elderly is a great gift for the Church!* The prayer of grandparents and of the elderly is a great gift for the Church, it is a treasure! A great injection of wisdom for the whole of human society: above all for one which is too busy, too taken, too distracted. Someone should also sing, for them too, sing of the signs of God, proclaim the signs of God, pray for them! Let us look to Benedict XVI, who chose to spend the final span of his life in prayer and listening to God! This is beautiful! A great believer of the last century, of the Orthodox tradition, Olivier Clément, said: "A civilization which has no place for prayer is a civilization in which old age has lost all meaning. And this is terrifying. For, above all, we need old people who pray; prayer is the purpose of old age". We need old people who pray because this is the very purpose of old age. The prayer of the elderly is a beautiful thing.

We are able to *thank* the Lord for the benefits received, and fill the emptiness of ingratitude that surrounds us. We are able to *intercede* for the expectations of younger generations and give dignity to the memory and sacrifices of past generations. We are able to remind ambitious young people that a life without love is a barren life. We are able to say to young people who are afraid that anxiety about the future can be overcome. We are able to teach the young who are overly self-absorbed that there is more joy in giving than in receiving. Grandfathers and grandmothers form the enduring "chorus" of a great spiritual sanctuary, where prayers of supplication and songs of praise sustain the community which toils and struggles in the field of life.

Last, *Prayer unceasingly purifies the heart.* Praise and supplication to God prevents the heart from becoming hardened by resentment and selfishness. How awful is the cynicism of an elderly person who has lost the meaning of his testimony, who scorns the young and does not communicate the wisdom of life! How beautiful, however, is the encouragement an elderly person manages to pass on to a young person who is seeking the meaning of faith and of life! It is truly the mission of grandparents, the vocation of the elderly. The words of grandparents have special value for the young. And the young know it. I still carry with me, always, in my breviary, the words my grandmother consigned to me in writing on the day of my priestly ordination. I read them often and they do me good.

How I would like a Church that challenges the throw-away culture with the overflowing joy of a new embrace between young and old! This is what I ask of the Lord today, this embrace!

## The family - 8. The Children (I)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,* After reviewing the various members of the family — mother, father, children, siblings, grandparents —, I would like to conclude this first group of catecheses on the family by speaking about children. I will do so in two phases: today I will focus on the great gift that children are for humanity — it is true they are a great gift for humanity, but also really excluded because they are not even allowed to be born — and the next time I shall focus on several wounds that unfortunately harm childhood. Who come to mind are the many children I met during my recent journey to Asia: full of life, of enthusiasm, and, on the other hand, I see that in the world, many of them live in unworthy conditions.... In fact, from the way children are treated society can be judged, not only morally but also sociologically, whether it is a liberal society or a society enslaved by international interests. First of all children remind us that we all, in the first years of life, were completely dependent upon the care and benevolence of others. The Son of God was not spared this stage. It is the mystery that we contemplate every year at Christmas. The Nativity Scene is the icon which communicates this reality in the simplest and most direct way. It is curious: God has no difficulty in making Himself understood by children, and children have no difficulty in understanding God. It is not by chance that in the Gospel there are several very beautiful and powerful words of Jesus regarding the “little ones”. This term, “babes”, refers to all the people who depend on the help of others, and to children in particular. For example, Jesus says: “I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to babes” (Mt 11:25). And again: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones: for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 18:10). Thus, children are in and of themselves a treasure for humanity and also for the Church, for they constantly evoke that necessary condition for entering the Kingdom of God: that of not considering ourselves self-sufficient, but in need of help, of love, of forgiveness. We all are in need of help, of love and of forgiveness! Children remind us of another beautiful thing: they remind us that we are always sons and daughters. Even if one becomes an adult, or an elder, even if one becomes a parent, if one occupies a position of responsibility, underneath all of this is still the identity of a child. We are all sons and daughters. And this always brings us back to the fact that we did not give ourselves life but that we received it. The great gift of life is the first gift that we received. Sometimes in life we risk forgetting about this, as if we were the masters of our existence, and instead we are fundamentally dependent. In reality, it is a motive of great joy to feel at every stage of life, in every situation, in every social condition, that we are and we remain sons and daughters. This is the main message that children give us, by their very presence: simply by their presence they remind us that each and every one of us is a son or daughter. But there are so many gifts, so many riches that children bring to humanity. I shall mention only a few. They bring their way of seeing reality, with a trusting and pure gaze. A child has spontaneous trust in his father and mother; he has spontaneous trust in God, in Jesus, in Our Lady. At the same time, his interior gaze is pure, not yet tainted by malice, by duplicity, by the “incrustations” of life which harden the heart. We know that children are also marked by original sin, that they are selfish, but they preserve purity, and interior simplicity. But children are not diplomats: they say what they feel, say what they see, directly. And so often they put their parents in difficulty, saying in front of other people: “I don’t like this because it is ugly”. But children say what they see, they are not two-faced, they have not yet learned that science of duplicity that we adults have unfortunately learned. Furthermore, children — in their interior simplicity — bring with them the capacity to receive and give tenderness. Tenderness is having a heart “of flesh” and not “of stone”, as the Bible says (cf. Ezek 36:26). Tenderness is also poetry: it is “feeling” things and events, not treating them as mere objects, only to use them, because they are useful....Children have the capacity to smile and to cry. Some, when I pick them up to embrace them, smile; others see me dressed in white and think I am a doctor and that I am going to vaccinate them, and they cry... spontaneously! Children are like this: they smile and cry, two things which are often “stifled” in grown-ups, we are no longer capable.... So often our smile becomes a cardboard smile, fixed, a smile that is not natural, even an artificial smile, like a clown. Children smile spontaneously and cry spontaneously. It always depends on the heart, and often our heart is blocked and loses this capacity to smile, to cry. So children can teach us how to smile and cry again. But we must ask ourselves: do I smile spontaneously, frankly, with love or is my smile artificial? Do I still cry or have I lost the capacity to cry? These are two very human questions that children teach us. For all these reasons Jesus invited his disciples to “become like children”, because “the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like them” (cf. Mt 18:3; Mk 10:14). Dear brothers and sisters, children bring life, cheerfulness, hope, also troubles. But such is life. Certainly, they also bring worries and sometimes many problems; but better a society with these worries and these problems, than a sad, grey society because it is without children! When we see that the birth rate of a society is barely one percent, we can say that this society is sad, it is grey because it has no children.