

I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS

WORLD DAY FOR GRANDPARENTS AND THE ELDERLY

#IAMWITHYOUALWAYS



FIRST WORLD DAY FOR GRANDPARENTS AND THE ELDERLY

PASTORAL GUIDELINES

The decision to hold a World Day for Grandparents and Older People has come at a time marked by a pandemic and by the suffering of our older generations in recent months in every part of the world. Reports of elderly people having to die alone and then not even being given a funeral, have been a cause of deep pain to the Church. It is one of the crosses of our time that was rightly brought to mind during the Way of the Cross with the Pope on Good Friday this year: “People jumped out of the ambulance dressed like astronauts, wearing protective suits, gloves, masks and face shields. They took away my grandfather who had been having difficulty breathing. That was the last time that I saw my grandfather. He died a few days later in hospital. I think of how lonely he must have felt. I could not be near him physically to say goodbye and to comfort him”.¹

To be unable to be close to those who suffer is at odds with a Christian’s calling to show compassion. This World Day is an opportunity to reaffirm that the Church can never remain distant from those who carry a cross. The theme chosen by the Holy Father, “I am with you always”, expresses clearly that, during the pandemic and in the better times that will hopefully follow, every ecclesial community wishes to be *with the elderly always*.

It was over a year ago when the first wave of the pandemic was at its height that the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life wrote: “as individuals and as local Churches, we can do a lot for the elderly: pray for them, cure the disease of loneliness, activate solidarity networks and much more. Faced with the scenario of a

¹ The Way of the Cross led by Pope Francis on Good Friday, 2 April 2021, St Peter’s Square, 13th Station

generation hit so severely, we have a common responsibility”.² When the storm has subsided, this task must take on an ordinary dimension in the life of parishes and the entire Church. The annual celebration of a day dedicated to older people is a way of incorporating attention for the frail elderly into the routine fabric of our pastoral work.

It cannot be said that the concern for the elderly shown by Pope Francis is something new. Recent Popes have given similar attention to the aged and have addressed them with words of wisdom and human warmth.³ Pope Francis has demonstrated his spiritual closeness to the elderly throughout his pontificate, and this should be read in the light of the ecclesiology that distinguishes him. Like other sectors that have not always received adequate pastoral care, older people have a precise mission to fulfil as holy faithful People of God. Pope Francis identifies their task as being to keep memories alive and to transmit the faith to the younger generations, but, more importantly, he considers them to be a significant component of the Catholic laity. They are not simply 'users' of the Church, but they are also companions on the journey. That is why this World Day is not an occasion to produce a document on old age, but rather there is a message addressed to the elderly in which the Holy Father asks them to share responsibility for the way the Church will go in the future and to take part in the construction of the world after the pandemic. This is something new that fits into the synodal perspective advocated by Pope Francis. According to the Pope, older people form part of “all of the baptised, who are the subject of the *sensus fidei* – infallible – *in credendo*.”⁴ This perspective shows us how important it is to provide better pastoral care for a generation that we may have often forgotten, mainly because we tend to consider older people to be already evangelised.

² DICASTERY FOR LAITY, FAMILY AND LIFE, *In loneliness the coronavirus kills more*, 7 April 2020. <http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/laityfamilylife/en/news/2020/nella-solitudine-il-coronavirus-uccide-di-piu.html>

³ See, for example, JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to the Elderly*, 1 October 1999; BENEDICT XVI, *Address during a visit to the Viva gli anziani home for the elderly run by the Sant'Egidio Community*, 12 November 2012.

⁴ Note by the Synod of Bishops, 21.05.2021

This first World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly is being celebrated midway through the year dedicated to family by the Holy Father on the fifth anniversary of the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. This is a deliberate choice that stems from awareness of how the elderly – all the elderly, including those who are not grandparents – need a family environment in which to live, and also how it is necessary for families to become aware of the role being played by their older members. In a globalised world, the relationship between the elderly and families is no longer taken for granted, but is, on the contrary, constantly being called into question. This is a trend that has different connotations according to geographical and cultural context, but there are some recurring features that suggest that there may be a crisis under way between the elderly and family, a sign of the times that must be taken into account. Family pastoral work itself, often concerned only with couple relationships and those between parents and children, has difficulty in focusing on the relationship between elderly parents and adult children and between grandparents and grandchildren.

The Pope wrote clearly about this in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. He said, “We have seen what happened to the elderly in certain places in our world as a result of the coronavirus. They did not have to die that way. Yet something similar had long been occurring during heat waves and in other situations where older people found themselves cruelly abandoned. We fail to realize that, by isolating the elderly and leaving them in the care of others without the closeness and concern of family members, we disfigure and impoverish the family itself. We also end up depriving young people of a necessary connection to their roots and of wisdom that the young cannot achieve on their own” (FT 19). These are important words that deserve to be raised up again. They can help us to reflect on the debt that families – and family pastoral care – owe to a generation that has in some respects fallen into oblivion.

This complex scenario (the pandemic, the search for a new leading role for the elderly, and the crisis in family relations), in addition to the need to help people avoid discouragement and despondency, has led the Church to choose a simple way of setting out on a collective journey and of nurturing solidarity: to celebrate. Seniors

and young people together: parents and children; grandparents and grandchildren; people who may not belong to the same family. The Church is aware of the need for reconciliation between generations and of the difficulties experienced by older people, but blame is not attached to the failings of anyone. The way chosen is to have an occasion of joyful celebration together.

As we see in the parable of the prodigal son and the merciful father, festivities can overcome the divisions that have scarred a family. The son had probably considered his father to be old and near death, and so he asked for his inheritance which he then squandered. His father welcomed him back and forgave him, and so he is reconciled with his elderly parent and also with himself. This is all celebrated with a feast in which they took part together. The merciful father is not unaware of the problems, betrayals and ambiguities, but he still chooses to celebrate. This is because only the joy of the Gospel is capable of filling the heart and setting us free “from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness” (EG 1). It is the basis on which to build renewed relationships between the generations and, thanks to the wisdom shown by the elderly, it is a rock on which to build our societies after the pandemic.

That is why we want the celebration of the first World Day of Grandparents and Older People to be experienced as a moment of celebration involving all generations. It is not a matter simply of happiness, but of joy born from the knowledge that the Lord is close to the lives of the elderly as well as the young, for *God is with us always*.

There are many pastoral tools that can give concrete expression to our pastoral concern for older people. For this purpose, it would be helpful to refer to a document concerning older people that was published years ago by the Pontifical Council for the Laity.⁵ It contains a wide-ranging reflection on the meaning and value of old age and gives concrete pastoral suggestions that are equally valid and relevant today. Among the many ways in which local churches and individuals can be close to older people, we would like to suggest one which is easy to implement and highly effective,

⁵ Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY, *The dignity of older people and their mission in the Church and in the world*, 1 October 1998

and that is to visit them. It is a tangible sign of a Church which goes forth. To pay a visit is a way, rooted in tradition, of showing compassion, including towards those who are ill or in prison. Today it seems that we need to add to the well-known list of the seven works of mercy, the 'work' of *visiting the elderly who are alone*. The decision of the Apostolic Penitentiary to grant a Plenary Indulgence to those who carry this out underlines its urgency.

Here we would also like to offer various other ideas on how to celebrate this World Day. We suggest that each parish or ecclesial entity could celebrate a Mass on the occasion of this *World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly* to commemorate the elderly of their community who died as a result of Covid-19; to ask young people to visit their grandparents, and especially the elderly who are alone, to give them the Holy Father's message. In addition to what we have proposed, we are convinced that every Church community will creatively find the best way to celebrate it in their particular context.

May this World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly be a festivity filled with the joy of the Gospel for all!

Rev. Alexandre Awi Mello, I. Sch.

Secretary
Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life

Card. Kevin Farrell

Prefect
Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life

VISITING GRANDPARENTS AND OLDER PEOPLE WHO ARE ALONE

- The first *World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly* will be celebrated in circumstances in which it will still not be possible in many countries for the elderly to physically attend Mass.
- In order for the message of closeness and consolation to reach everyone on this World Day – even those who are most isolated – we ask people to visit their grandparents and the elderly living alone in their community and to give them the Holy Father’s message.
- A visit is a tangible sign of a Church of outreach. At a time of social distancing because of the pandemic, a visit shows that there is a way of being close to older people while still observing safety measures.
- A visit is a personal choice to *arise and go in haste* to others (cf. Lk 1:39), just as Mary did when she visited her elderly cousin Elizabeth.
- A visit is an opportunity for a grandchild to say to his or her grandparent and for a young person to say to an elderly person they are visiting, “I am with you always”.
- A visit can be an opportunity to bring a gift, such as a flower, and to read the World Day prayer together.
- A visit can also be an occasion to offer the elderly, especially those who have not left their homes for a long time, an opportunity to receive the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist.
- A visit to an older person living alone is one of the ways of obtaining a Plenary Indulgence granted on the occasion of this World Day.

- In places where health emergency measures still make it impossible to visit in person, love can use imagination to find ways of reaching lonely elderly people by phone or social media.
- The World Day message can be shared by posting pictures of visits on social media with the hashtag *#IamWithYouAlways*.

PREPARING THE WORLD DAY WITH THE ELDERLY

- The elderly are the main target group of the Day's activities. The Holy Father's message is addressed to them.
- It is important to ensure that as many older people as possible participate in person in the Sunday liturgy celebrated on the occasion of the World Day.
- Older people from the parish or Church group can be invited for a moment of reflection on the Pope's message for their World Day. A printed version can be distributed to all those present and the video message can be watched together.
- Anyone visiting elderly people living alone can give the text of the message to those who are unable to attend the meetings.
- All grandparents and all elderly people that have been reached on the occasion of their World Day can be commended with the Holy Father's prayer intentions, together with the special intentions of their own community.

PREPARING THIS WORLD DAY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

- You can convene the young people of your community a few weeks before the World Day to explain it and to make sure that they reach as many older people as possible with their visits.
- Similarly, you can meet with the young people after the celebration so that they can share their feedback of the visits.
- Young people can organise social campaigns to spread information about the World Day by using the hashtag *#IamWithYouAlways*.

REMEMBERING THE ELDERLY WHO DIED BECAUSE OF COVID-19

- During the Eucharistic celebration for the World Day, or at a dedicated time, there can be a moment to recall the elderly people in the parish or community who died as a result of the pandemic, and in particular those for whom it had not been possible to hold a funeral service.
- One possible way is to read out the names of the elderly at the end of the prayers of the faithful, and to light a candle for each person remembered.

PLENARY INDULGENCE

- On 13 May, the Apostolic Penitentiary promulgated a Decree granting a Plenary Indulgence on the occasion of the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly.
- The elderly can obtain an Indulgence by participating in one of the Masses celebrated on the occasion of this World Day.
- In view of the continuing health emergency and the fact that some elderly people are unable to attend Mass in person for health reasons, the Indulgence is extended to those who participate via television, radio or the internet.
- The Indulgence is also granted to all those who perform a 'work of mercy' on this World Day by visiting an elderly person who is alone.
- In places where visiting in person is expressly forbidden by the public authorities in order to avoid contagion, it is also possible to obtain the Indulgence through a virtual meeting.