



DICASTERIUM
PRO LAICIS, FAMILIA ET VITA

Introduction

by His Eminence Cardinal Kevin Farrell

International Congress
on the Pastoral Care of the Elderly “The Richness of Many Years of Life”

Vatican City, 29-31 January 2020

Most Reverend Fathers, Honoured Guests,

Welcome to the First International Congress on the Pastoral Care of the Elderly entitled “*The Richness of Many Years*”.

Your very presence here today and this event in itself are, for us and for our Church, “good tidings”. The invitation we addressed to the Episcopal Conferences several months ago to participate in these days of reflection has had a broad and warm response. The large number of registrations received have even forced us to amend the logistics and we express our gratitude to those connected to the conference from the room next door.

The decision to set up our pastoral care of the elderly, to create within the Dicastery an office to deal with this growing phenomenon and to convene you all here in Rome, comes from our obligation to attend pastorally to the ageing.

During the past two years, listening to bishops on *ad limina* visits to our Dicastery, and likewise to those associations that spend time and effort every day in caring for the elderly, has convinced us of the need for a serious and urgent moment of reflection, to prompt the Universal Church to act on what is revealing itself as a spiritual need and a true and proper pastoral mission.

Listening is one of the fundamental attitudes that the Holy Father requires of those involved in pastoral care: he often talks about “the apostolate of the ear”.

For this reason, our meeting is committed to a triple form of listening: listening to the “signs of the times”, listening to the Magisterium and listening to your experiences in order to set down together some general guidelines that can be useful to dioceses all over the world.

In fact, one of the key features of the *epochal change* the Church is experiencing is the shift in the demographic equilibrium among the generations within our communities: a widely studied phenomenon that has occurred in a more evident manner in some environments, but has now spread to all the continents. A recent report issued by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs entitled “*World Population Ageing 2019*” affirms that “*All societies in the world are in the midst of this longevity revolution—some are at its early stages and some are more advanced. But all will pass through this extraordinary transition*”. It is a true demographic revolution, one of those “signs of the times” that we cannot ignore. In 2100 61% of the world population will be made up of people over 65 years of age and that the elderly population will already double during the next thirty years.

All of this not only has implications of a sociological, economic, anthropological and political nature, but above all poses questions and needs of a spiritual nature that require us to act.

In particular, the pastoral accompaniment required by the elderly is an obvious need as we are faced with the challenge of increasing longevity of life. In our societies, where the “throwaway culture” and the “exclusion of vulnerable” often dominates the collective imagination as well as family, political and social choices, the “richness of many years” is not always welcomed as a blessing, in other words, as a gift. Therefore, in such cases, faced with the perception of old age as a burden, how can the Church accompany society to make it aware how

precious a long life is? How can the Church change the prevalent perception of the Richness of years of Life?

The second kind of listening, that will guide us during these days, is listening to the Magisterium of the Church. Our awareness of the need to dedicate pastoral attention to the elderly is not a novelty introduced by the Pope Francis. Already during the eighties, John Paul II explicitly urged the Church to establish a pastoral care programme for the elderly. Today, Pope Francis continually places the question at the centre of his pastoral actions, insisting on the importance of grandparents in the transmission of faith, on the need for dialogue among the generations, on the importance of the elderly in preserving the roots of God's Faithful People and, especially, on how to overcome the "throwaway culture" related to the elderly.

These are matters we will try to address during this Congress, aware that hearing, consciousness and ecclesial action will develop by starting from the magisterial indications in a non-mechanical way. All three of these aspects require time, assimilation and enculturation, experience and reaching out to the new promptings at a local level.

Our objective is to encourage the perception of responsibility in this specific context of pastoral care that is having difficulty in taking off only in some regions of the world, despite the expansion of the theme on a planetary level. Specifically, the throwaway culture requires us to act, not only to protect the most vulnerable people but above all to change the cultural and social approach to this phase of human life that can, for very many people, be a source of gifts and richness both for themselves and their communities. For example, the role played by grandparents, of how in some geographical contexts this is precious and irreplaceable for the care and transmission of the faith to the new generations and whose presence must be promoted in family pastoral care; or about the importance of taking into account intergenerational dialogue in youth pastoral

care. All this cannot be taken for granted and requires commitment, perseverance and sense of responsibility on our part.

In conclusion, there is a third kind of listening. We need to listen to some of your experiences. We are able to understand the world better from its peripheries and, as a Dicastery, we need to establish a link with the realities you represent. We need to hear from you and your experience about the best ways to involve the elderly in the Church's pastoral care projects. The need that I envisage is to develop new approaches to include elderly people the pastoral life of the Church

During the months we have been preparing for this conference, we have received a great deal of material from some local dioceses and we were surprised to discover the vast extent and diversity of the initiatives you are carrying out. Unfortunately, on this occasion, it will only be possible to tell you about some of these but our being together here is also an occasion to share them in the intervals of dialogue we will try to offer you, just as we wish to encourage personal encounters among all those present.

For example, it is surprising to discover that some of you go to visit elderly people in the refugee camps in South Sudan, that there are elderly people who visit prisoners in the jails of Senegal, that in Iran the Daughters of Charity talk about Jesus to elderly people who have been abandoned. We have received news from China about the pastoral activities carried out on the occasion of the Chinese New Year. An initiative we found interesting is that of helping Moldavian elderly people to live together, to share the few resources available to them and ensure themselves of a dignified life. It is also comforting to learn that during recent months, national conferences of operators in the pastoral care of the elderly have been organised in Colombia and Guatemala. Despite this, there is still a lot of work to be done. Above all – but not only – in Western countries where it is

difficult to find pastoral care projects involving them both as recipients and protagonists.

Pastoral care of the elderly is something new. We must – as the Pope would say – implement a process and set up a dialogue that can only be unprecedented. One of the few certainties we have is Pope Francis' firm opposition to the throwaway culture. When he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires he talked about the elderly discarded in rest homes *like a summer coat in a closet*. More recently he described the abandonment of elderly parents by their own children as a mortal sin. In this sense, we must clearly affirm that families have a huge responsibility towards the elderly. There are many family pastoral care agents or ministers among you: we need to promote a conversion, human and pastoral, among families with whom you are in contact so that the elderly are no longer discarded! Let us all remember that the family is the place where they should be able to live and wherever this is not possible, the ecclesial communities must themselves become the family for those who have been deprived of one. We cannot be indifferent to the removal of elderly people from their families when they are forced to live in anonymous institutions and in some case even become victims of abuse.

It is our desire during these days to ask ourselves what direction pastoral care of the elderly should take. It is an unexplored field, so much so that we cannot even find a common vocabulary. We have chosen to use the word elderly, *anziani*, *personas mayores*, *pessoas idosas* and *personnes âgées*, but we are fully aware that, depending on the context, these words take on different nuances and meanings. Although we are just taking our first steps, I am very happy that some episcopal conferences, such as those of South Korea and Croatia, have decided to study the topic, also as a result of our invitation to Rome. This means that our Congress is already beginning to have some positive effects.

Ultimately, we seek to understand how to include in our pastoral care programs that segment of the population that is growing in numbers everywhere. Much is already being done in different parts of the world by Conferences of Bishops, by many Movements and Associations of the Faithful, and by individual persons.

We cannot take for granted that all those who grow old have encountered Jesus during their life. As the Holy Father reminded us, we are no longer living in a Christian era. We need some pastoral imagination!

On the other hand, the numbers tell us that the laity of the future will increasingly be composed of people of an advanced age. What is their specific vocation in the Church of tomorrow?

The challenge that awaits us is to gradually construct a common dialogue. You will always find the doors of the *Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life* open to listen and cooperate in what we consider one of the contexts on which the future of the Church and society depends.

Therefore, let us ask the Lord to bless the fruit of our Congress and all of us. Thank you!