

“The elderly and the future of Europe”

Joint Webinar COMECE-FAFCE

1 March 2021

Your Eminence, Your Excellence, Madams and Sirs,

I would like to thank COMECE and FAFCE for inviting me to speak at this meeting. In particular, I thank and greet His Eminence Cardinal Hollerich for his presence.

The issue of the presence and role of the elderly, and their importance, is now pressing more than ever for the future of our continent. We in Europe must act in a more cohesive and inclusive manner and make decisions that will facilitate intergenerational solidarity, for, without it, there cannot be real human, economic and social development. With only a few weeks to go before the beginning of the “*Amoris Laetitia Family Year*”, I see this event as a first concrete opportunity to give impetus to joint action aimed at preserving and encouraging dialogue between generations. The epicentre for this is to be found in the family.

The inversion of the demographic pyramid is causing institutions all over the world to seriously consider specific measures to restore dignity and respect to the lives of the elderly. They are not only planning for the current pandemic times. Their perspective goes beyond this emergency and takes shape in organised structural management at the social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual level. The collaboration of the entire community – civil and ecclesial – is essential.

The document “*The Elderly and the Future of Europe*” was conceived well before this pandemic which is having such a tremendous impact on the elderly population. It is precisely the fact that its planning precedes the prevailing situation that makes it a paramount text, lucid in its analysis and proposals, and with a high potential for positive outcomes.

Longer life expectancy is good news in itself. It is the fulfilment of an ancient human dream to live a long life. “*Increases in life expectancy and quality of life are to be considered as a success of the social model within the core values of the EU.*”¹ The paradox of our time, however, is that we want to live longer without 'becoming old', without bearing the marks of our long lives in body and spirit. This is the culture of '*ageism*' which regards the passing of the years as something with a negative connotation. However, it can be counteracted by allowing the elderly to feel included and by protecting them from all forms of discrimination, and from the negative and debasing representation of old age that dominates many societies today. This cultural and educational undertaking and commitment needs to be shared by all generations and institutions at all levels.² Life is a gift, always, even when we become more frail. Until we become aware of this, we will always fail to understand that an ageing society not only brings challenges, but also opportunities for human, economic and social development. It is a fact that older people hold an invaluable role in family and society as they transmit the fundamental values that every society needs in order to look to the future with wisdom and confidence. It is also a fact that they are an asset for society as a whole, as they provide opportunities for the creation of new services, new jobs and new forms of cooperation.

¹ Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on Demographic Challenges – the Way Ahead, 8.6.2020.

² Pope Francis, Address to participants in the International congress “The richness of many years of life”, 31.01.2020.

Of course, it is not up to me to suggest concrete solutions or welfare policies. However, I would like to dwell briefly on a point which I believe must be taken into account in any concrete measure, including at an institutional level. I am referring to the close relationship between the ageing of the population and the demographic winter. Pope Francis spoke about this in *Fratelli Tutti*.³

If we take a look at the other side of the coin, we may find that perhaps it is not the elderly who are too many in absolute terms, but that it is children and young people who are few. Productive discussion about the ageing of the population cannot be dissociated from serious reflection on the decrease in births. The figures in the European Commission's "*Report on Demographic Change*" are clear. They highlight a steady increase in the dependency ratio, which on the one hand calls on us to strive to create conditions for concrete intergenerational solidarity, and on the other to reflect seriously on the causes of this demographic decline. Its origins not only lie in economic and cultural constraints, but also in a profound lack of hope and confidence in the future on the part of the younger generations. Our individualistic and utilitarian culture that prevents us from valuing old age is the same culture that does not allow us to value unborn life. It is the same culture that, at first glance, seems to create the conditions for individual well-being, but in the medium and long term proves to be short-sighted with regard to the common good and to the fulfilment of the life aspirations of human beings.

The current pandemic has further highlighted the process of fragmentation of our societies, and it has shown that it is completely illusory to think that one's own well-being is unrelated to that of others. We are not saved by ourselves, as pope Francis constantly reminds us. One of the features of this phenomenon is undoubtedly the clear separation between generations, and this is where the fundamental role of the family comes into play. Families are the place *par excellence* where dialogue and intergenerational solidarity can be pooled together: the elderly with children, in other words, the succession of generations. We cannot do without families.

The COMECE-FAFCE document tells us that the keys to facing the current demographic challenges are to be found in the family and in networks of families. It says that "families should be put in the best conditions to flourish and to be hubs of social cohesion" as well as of "intergenerational solidarity". This is not only within families, but also at a community level, between families, and in society.

This is how the concrete proposals for European Intergenerational Solidarity (point D), provide realistic ways of achieving the common good. Better still, they can achieve the 'relational goods' that conjugal families, with the stability and certainty they confer on their members, are capable of generating. For this reason, families require sustained support from the State and institutions, since the family is the *institutum*, the foundation of our society, a precondition for every other possibility of development for human persons in their social dimension. Only through the family can the conditions for the common good be created.

It is families that are best able to encourage positive attitudes in the marketplace, such as sharing and solidarity between generations. Families generate human resources, circulate capital based on specific needs, and produce services. The family is a driving force of the

³ Cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, 19.

economic system. Our experience of the pandemic has shown this. We have seen how families were the shock absorbers that cushioned and, unfortunately, at times also suffered the heaviest human and financial consequences of the crisis, especially with regard to women and women with young children.

The reason for the potential of the family lies precisely in the fact that families embody and develop relational goods that only work in reciprocity and with a view to solidarity. These 'goods' depend on the motivations and ways of interaction between people that can only be enjoyed if they are shared. The family is the main engine capable of generating security and gratuitous positive attitudes that can feed the economic and social system. Families must therefore be in a position to be generative. By guaranteeing family life, the political system is guaranteeing a human good.

However, demographic trends in the EU are clearly pointing to fertility rates significantly below the replacement level of 2.1. This means that there is *"an increasing number of solitary elderly people with no children, grandchildren or family. The close link between the demographic decline and the characteristics of the next elderly generations should be considered for future projections"*⁴.

It is therefore necessary to support the family with measures that give specific help with their forward planning and thus encourage and restore confidence to the younger generations. *"Public policies should be designed in order to create the conditions, [...] enabling individuals and families to have the children they wish and to enjoy a better quality of life, live in safety and achieve balance between work, family and caring responsibilities"*. That is why it is important to *"encourage investment in children as the form of social investment that pays the highest return in the future"*⁵.

It is also necessary to rethink our approach to supporting maternity and paternity. I think it is important to say this, because thinking deeply about the culture of life through new thinking on elderly life is not enough without equally incisive thought on nascent life. Bringing a child into the world is not a self-referential decision, but, though personal, it is a relational choice. To reduce it to a self-referential decision means to make it difficult – especially for women – to be able to welcome life with confidence and courage, and to feel free as women and mothers. Femininity and maternity, like masculinity and paternity, are dimensions that urgently need to be brought back together in European culture, and so restore to the younger generations the truly generative role that belongs to them.

It is therefore essential to enable people to carry out their family roles in harmony. When we feel supported and fulfilled, each of us opens up to life and this triggers intergenerational solidarity and mutual support relationships. This occurs according to principles of subsidiarity, especially with regard to those who are most frail, from the perspective of the common good. Here the term 'common good' expresses what unites people with each other and with institutions, so that all may be fulfilled and institutions may achieve the purpose for which they were set up.

The common good will never be the result of simply adding up the personal goods of each individual. Its rationale is that of a system to be followed by all of us: individuals, families,

⁴ Comece-Fafce, The elderly and the future of Europe.

⁵ Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on Demographic Challenges – the Way Ahead, 8.6.2020.

businesses, the state and the international community. It is necessary because it is an expression of the dignity of the person in society, since no one can find fulfilment in themselves alone, regardless of their being with and for others. Nor can it be reduced to mere socio-economic well-being, for it implies that we responsibly work for the good of others as if it were our own. It is the aim of politics, to which is entrusted the task of guaranteeing the conditions of human and social life ensuring the full development of each person. In this sense, it requires a commitment, also economic, to put the needs of each person at the centre.

Effective policies cannot only arise out of a need for urgent measures. They only take shape around values that unite and that make society robust and cohesive. We all serve humanity with its intrinsic and common fragility, and we search for justice that does not discriminate, but that aims at creating the conditions where we all recognise the inviolability of every human life. If this were not the case, we would not feel the need to seek common strategies and to come together. In the drama taking place at this time in history, the word TOGETHER is the remedy. There is a very beautiful image that can help us understanding how the common action that is required of us is so decisive: it is the image of coal and diamonds. These are two elements that are chemically identical, but their molecular structure is very different: one stifles light, the other reflects it. We can be like diamonds and reflect and enhance the sense of what is happening to us and illuminate the decisions of those who are called upon to take action.

Demographic challenges will only be met effectively if we are able to safeguard the family. The family is the link between generations, and it is the source of intergenerational balance and solidarity. By generating relational goods inside and outside itself, the family can domesticate the world, in the true sense of the word, that is, to make it a *domus*, a welcoming home for each one of us. It can be a place where everyone can feel that they belong to the common home.

Thank you.

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