



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

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[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Old Age – 5. Fidelity to God’s Visitation for the Next Generation

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our series of catecheses on the theme of old age, today we will look at the tender picture painted by the evangelist Saint Luke, who depicts two elderly figures, Simeon and Anna. Their reason for living, before taking leave of this world, is to await God’s visit. They were waiting for God to visit them, that is, Jesus. Simeon knows, by a premonition of the Holy Spirit, that he will not die before seeing the Messiah. Anna goes and offers her service to the temple every day. Both of them recognize the presence of the Lord in the child Jesus, who fills with consolation their long wait and reassures them as they bid farewell to life. This is a scene of encounter with Jesus, and of farewell.

What can we learn from these two elderly figures filled with spiritual vitality?

First, we learn that the fidelity of waiting *sharpens the senses*. Besides, as we know, the Holy Spirit does precisely this: *enlightens the senses*. In the ancient hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, with which we continue to this day to invoke the Holy Spirit, we say: “*Accende lumen sensibus*”, (Guide our minds with your blest light), enlighten our senses. The Spirit is capable of doing this: of

sharpening the senses of the soul, despite the limitations and the wounds of the senses of the body. In one way or another, old age weakens the sensitivity of the body: one is more blind, another is more deaf. However, an old age spent in awaiting God's visit will not miss his passage. On the contrary, it will be even more ready to grasp it, having greater sensitivity to welcome the Lord when he passes. Remember that it is typical of the Christian to be attentive to the visits of the Lord, because the Lord passes through our life, with inspirations, with invitations to better ourselves. And Saint Augustine used to say: "I'm afraid of when God passes" — "But why are you afraid?" — Yes, "I fear that he will pass me by unnoticed". It is the Holy Spirit who prepares the senses to understand when the Lord is visiting us, just as he did with Simeon and Anna.

Today we need this more than ever: we need *an old age that is gifted with lively spiritual senses*, capable of recognizing the signs of God, or rather, the Sign of God, who is Jesus. A sign that challenges us, always: Jesus challenges us because he is "a sign that is spoken against" (Lk 2:34) — but that fills us with joy. Because crisis does not necessarily bring sadness, no: being in crisis, rendering service to the Lord, very often gives you peace and joy. The *anaesthesia of the spiritual senses* — and this is bad — the anaesthesia of the spiritual senses, in the excitement and daze of those of the body, is a widespread syndrome in a society that cultivates the illusion of eternal youth, and its most dangerous feature is the fact that it is mostly unconscious. One does not realize one is anaesthetized. And this happens. It has always happened and it happens in our time. Numbed senses, without understanding what is happening: when they are numb, the inner senses, the senses of the Spirit that enable us to understand the presence of God or the presence of evil, cannot distinguish between them.

When you lose sensitivity of touch or of taste, you realize it immediately. Instead, that of the soul, sensitivity of the soul, you can ignore that for a long time, living without realizing that you have lost the sensitivity of the soul. It is not simply a matter of thinking of God or religion. The insensitivity of the spiritual senses relates to compassion and pity, shame and remorse, fidelity and devotion, tenderness and honour, responsibility for oneself and for others. It is interesting: insensitivity prevents you from understanding compassion, it stops you from understanding pity, it stops you from feeling shame or remorse for having done something bad.... It is like that. Numbed spiritual senses are confusing, and one no longer feels those things, spiritually. And old age becomes, so to speak, the first casualty, the first victim of this loss of sensitivity. In a society that exercises sensitivity primarily for enjoyment, there cannot but be a lack of attention to the frail, and the competition of the winners prevails. And this is how sensitivity is lost. Certainly, the rhetoric of inclusion is the ritual formula of every politically correct discourse. But it still does not bring about a real correction of the practices of normal co-existence: *a culture of social tenderness struggles to grow*. No, the spirit of human fraternity — which I felt it was necessary to relaunch forcefully — is like a discarded garment, to be admired, yes, but ... in a museum. One loses human sensitivity, one loses these movements of the Spirit that make us human.

It is true that in real life we can observe, with moving gratitude, many young people capable of

honouring this fraternity to its fullest. But the problem is precisely here: there is a gap, a shameful gap, between the testimony of this lifeblood of social tenderness and the conformism that compels youth to present itself in an entirely different way. What can we do to bridge this gap?

From the story of Simeon and Anna, but also from other biblical accounts that tell of old age's sensitivity to the spirit, comes a hidden indication that deserves to be brought to the forefront. In real terms, in what does the revelation that kindles the sensitivity of Simeon and Anna consist? It consists in recognizing the sure sign of God's visitation in a child, whom they did not beget and whom they see for the first time. They accept *not to be protagonists, but only witnesses*. And when one accepts not being a protagonist, but gets involved as a witness, things go well: that man or that woman is maturing well. But if one always wants to be a protagonist, one will never mature this journey towards the fullness of old age. God's visitation is not embodied in their lives, [the lives] of those who want to be protagonists and never witnesses; it does not bring them onto the scene as saviours: God does not take flesh in their generation, but in the generation to come. They lose the spirit, they lose the desire to live with maturity, and as one usually says, they live in a superficial way. It is the great generation of the superficial, who do not allow themselves to feel things with the sensitivity of the Spirit. But why do they not allow themselves? Partly out of laziness, and partly because they are already unable: they have lost it. It is bad when a civilization loses the sensitivity to the Spirit. On the contrary, it is wonderful when we find elderly people like Simeon and Anna who safeguard this sensitivity to the Spirit, and who are capable of understanding different situations, just as these two understood the situation in front of them, which was the manifestation of the Messiah. There is no resentment and no recrimination for this, when they are in this state of stillness. Instead, great emotion and great comfort when the spiritual senses are still alive. The emotion and comfort of being able to see and announce that the history of their generation is not lost or wasted, precisely thanks to an event that takes on flesh and is manifested in the generation that follows. And this is what elderly people feel when their grandchildren come to speak with them: they feel revived. "Ah, my life is still here". It is so important to go see the elderly; it is so important to listen to them. It is so important to speak with them, because there is this exchange of civilization, this exchange of maturity between the young and the elderly. And in this way, our civilization advances in a mature way.

Only spiritual old age can give this humble and dazzling witness, making it authoritative and exemplary for all. Old age that has cultivated the sensitivity of the soul *extinguishes all envy between generations*, all resentment, all recrimination for an advent of God in the generation to come, which arrives together with the departure of one's own. And this is what happens to an elderly person who is *open* to a young person who is *open*: he or she bids farewell to life while, so to speak, "handing over" life to the new generation. And this is the farewell of Simeon and Anna: "Now I can go in peace". The spiritual sensitivity of old age is capable of breaking down competition and conflict between generations in a credible and definitive way. This sensitivity goes beyond: with this sensitivity the elderly go beyond conflict, they go beyond, they go towards unity, not conflict. This is certainly impossible for men, but possible for God. And nowadays we are in

great need of this, of the sensibility of the spirit, the maturity of the spirit; we need wise, elders, mature in spirit, who give hope for life!

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the groups from England, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Israel and the United States of America. May our Lenten journey bring us to celebrate Easter with hearts purified and renewed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Upon each of you, and your families, I invoke joy and peace in Christ our Redeemer.

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *the sick*, to *young people* and to *newlyweds*. During this last leg of the Lenten journey, let us look at the Cross of Christ, the highest expression of God's love, and let us make an effort to always be close to those who suffer, to those who are on their own, to the weak who endure violence and have no one to defend them.

I offer my blessing to all of you!

APPEAL

Dear brothers and sisters, next Saturday and Sunday [I will go to Malta](#). In that luminous land I shall be a pilgrim in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul, who was welcomed there with great humanity after being shipwrecked at sea on his way to Rome. This Apostolic Journey will therefore be an opportunity to go to the wellsprings of the proclamation of the Gospel, to know at first hand a Christian community with a lively history stretching back thousands of years, and to meet the inhabitants of a country that lies at the center of the Mediterranean and in the south of the European continent, which today is increasingly engaged in welcoming so many brothers and sisters seeking refuge. I greet all of you Maltese from the bottom of my heart, as of now: have a nice day. I thank all those who have worked to prepare this visit and I ask every one of you to accompany me in prayer. Thank you!

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on the meaning and value of old age, in the light of God's word, we now consider how the elderly Simeon and Anna can serve as an

example for all the elderly. They too are called to offer a personal witness of faith and trust in the fulfilment of God's promises, and thus build bridges between the generations. While the passing of years dulls the physical senses, at this precious time in life the Holy Spirit can sharpen our spiritual senses. How much our society needs older persons capable of recognizing and welcoming Christ's presence and the gifts of his Spirit. A society that exalts pleasure and cultivates the illusion of eternal youth can easily grow anaesthetized to the essential spiritual values of faith, wisdom, compassion and care for those in need. The lives and witness of the elderly can ensure this spiritual grounding and teach us the primary importance of discerning God's presence in our daily lives and the unfolding of his saving plan from one generation to the next.