



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS

JOHN PAUL II

FOR LENT 2005

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. Each year, the Lenten Season is set before us as a good opportunity for the intensification of prayer and penance, opening hearts to the docile welcoming of the divine will. During Lent, a spiritual journey is outlined for us that prepares us to relive the Great Mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Christ. This is done primarily by listening to the Word of God more devoutly and by practising mortification more generously, thanks to which it is possible to render greater assistance to those in need.

This year, dear brothers and sisters, I wish to bring to your attention a theme which is rather current, well-illustrated by the following verse from Deuteronomy: "*Loving the Lord... means life to you, and length of days...*" (30:20). These are the words that Moses directs to the people, inviting them to embrace the Covenant with Yahweh in the country of Moab, "*that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord, your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him.*" (30:19-20). The fidelity to this divine Covenant is for Israel a guarantee of the future: "*that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them.*" (30:20). According to the Biblical understanding, reaching old age is a sign of the Most High's gracious benevolence. Longevity appears, therefore, as a special divine gift.

It is upon this theme that I would like to ask you to reflect during this Lent, in order to deepen the awareness of the role that the elderly are called to play in society and in the Church, and thus to prepare your hearts for the loving welcome that should always be reserved for them. Thanks to the contribution of science and medicine, one sees in society today a lengthening of the human life span and a subsequent increase in the number of elderly. This demands a more specific attention to the world of so-called "old" age, in order to help its members to live their full potential by placing them at the service of the entire community. The care of the elderly, above all when they pass

through difficult moments, must be of great concern to all the faithful, especially in the ecclesial communities of Western societies, where the problem is particularly present.

2. Human life is a precious gift to be loved and defended in each of its stages. The Commandment, "You shall not kill!", always requires respecting and promoting human life, from its beginning to its natural end. It is a command that applies even in the presence of illness and when physical weakness reduces the person's ability to be self-reliant. If growing old, with its inevitable conditions, is accepted serenely in the light of faith, it can become an invaluable opportunity for better comprehending the Mystery of the Cross, which gives full sense to human existence.

The elderly need to be understood and helped in this perspective. I wish, here, to express my appreciation to those who dedicate themselves to fulfilling these needs, and I also call upon other people of good will to take advantage of Lent for making their own personal contribution. This will allow many elderly not to think of themselves as a burden to the community, and sometimes even to their own families, living in a situation of loneliness that leads to the temptation of isolating themselves or becoming discouraged.

It is necessary to raise the awareness in public opinion that the elderly represent, in any case, a resource to be valued. For this reason, economic support and legislative initiatives, which allow them not to be excluded from social life, must be strengthened. In truth, during the last decade, society has become more attentive to their needs, and medicine has developed palliative cures that, along with an integral approach to the sick person, are particularly beneficial for long-term patients.

3. The greater amount of free time in this stage of life offers the elderly the opportunity to face the primary issues that perhaps had been previously set aside, due to concerns that were pressing or considered a priority nonetheless. Knowledge of the nearness of the final goal leads the elderly person to focus on that which is essential, giving importance to those things that the passing of years do not destroy.

Precisely because of this condition, the elderly person can carry out his or her role in society. If it is true that man lives upon the heritage of those who preceded him, and that his future depends definitively on how the cultural values of his own people are transmitted to him, then the wisdom and experience of the elderly can illuminate his path on the way of progress toward an ever more complete form of civilisation.

How important it is to rediscover this mutual enrichment between different generations! The Lenten Season, with its strong call to conversion and solidarity, leads us this year to focus on these important themes which concern everyone. What would happen if the People of God yielded to a certain current mentality that considers these people, our brothers and sisters, as almost useless when they are reduced in their capacities due to the difficulties of age or sickness?

Instead, how different the community would be, if, beginning with the family, it tries always to remain open and welcoming towards them.

4. Dear brothers and sisters, during Lent, aided by the Word of God, let us reflect upon how important it is that each community accompany with loving understanding those who grow old. Moreover, one must become accustomed to thinking confidently about the mystery of death, so that the definitive encounter with God occur in a climate of interior peace, in the awareness that He "*who knit me in my mother's womb*" (cf. Psalm 139:13b) and who willed us "*in his image and likeness*" (cf. Gen. 1:26) will receive us.

Mary, our guide on the Lenten journey, leads all believers, especially the elderly, to an ever more profound knowledge of Christ dead and risen, who is the ultimate reason for our existence. May she, the faithful servant of her divine Son, together with Saints Ann and Joachim, intercede for each one of us "now and at the hour of our death".

My Blessing to All!

From the Vatican, September 8, 2004.

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