



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 16th WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

"Social Communications and the Problems of the Elderly"

1982

Dearest brothers and sisters in Christ,

For sixteen years now the Church has been holding this "Day" celebration in which the faithful are invited, in response to a specific direction of the conciliar *Decree Inter Mirifica*, to engage in prayerful reflection concerning their personal obligations in the important matter of social communications (cf. *Inter Mirifica*, no. 18). It has been the practice to focus attention on a particular theme for each celebration, while inviting the prayers and offerings of the faithful (*idem*). In line with this tradition, it has been my wish that the Day should this year be devoted to the Elderly, gladly adopting the theme on which the United Nations Organization has chosen to concentrate in 1982.

1. The problems of the elderly today differ considerably from those with which they had to contend in the past. There is, firstly, the fact that the numbers of old people have been steadily increasing; in countries with a high standard of living the increase is accounted for by the improvement in health services and medical care, by better working conditions and general welfare.

Then there are certain factors proper to the modern industrial society, the principal being the alteration in the pattern of the family, which is now generally reduced to a small nucleus, whereas in a peasant society it was a patriarchal grouping. Further, it is often isolated and unstable, sometimes even broken up. Various things have contributed to bring this about, such as the flight from the land and the rush to the cities; and to these may be added in our times the (sometimes immoderate) search for comforts and tendency towards consumerism. In this kind of context, the elderly, often enough, finish by becoming an encumbrance.

And so there come about those conditions that far too often make the lives of the elderly a misery:

abject poverty, especially in countries where there are no social security provisions for the old; forced inaction for the pensioners, particularly those who have worked in industry, or who are now very old; desolate loneliness for those deprived of the affection of family or the company of friends. Then, as the years pass and their strength fails and illness comes to debilitate them further, they are made to feel increasingly conscious of their physical fragility and, above all, of the burden of life.

2. There can be no adequate solution to these problems unless they are taken to heart by everybody and accepted as a matter with which the whole of humanity must concern itself; for all humanity is called upon to support and care for the elderly, because of the dignity of each and every human being and because of the significance of human life which "is a gift, always."

The Sacred Scripture, which speaks frequently about the old, considers old age as a gift which renews itself and which ought to be lived each day in openness to God and to the neighbour.

In the Old Testament, the old person is regarded as a master of life: "How attractive is wisdom in the aged! Rich experience is the crown of the aged, and their boast is the fear of the Lord" (Sir 25:5-6). What is more, the old have another important task: to pass on the word of God, to the new generations: "We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what deeds thou didst perform in their days" (Ps 44:1). Announcing to the young their own faith in God, they preserve a fecundity of the spirit which suffers no decline with the weakening of their physical powers: "They still bring forth fruit in old age, they are ever full of sap and green, to show that the Lord is upright" (Ps 92:1-15). For these tasks of the aged there are corresponding duties for the young. They must listen to them: "Do not disregard the discourse of the aged (Sir 8:9), ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you" (Deut 32:7); and they must assist them: "Help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives; even if he is lacking in understanding, show forbearance; in all your strength do not despise him" (Sir 3:12-13).

No less rich is the teaching of the New Testament, where St. Paul gives "evangelical" counsels for an ideal of life in old age, prescribing sobriety, dignity, judiciousness, soundness in the faith, in love and patience (cf Tit 2:2). A very striking example is given by the old man Simeon, who lived in the hope and expectation of meeting the Messiah, and for whom the Christ became the fullness of life and the hope of the future. Having prepared himself in faith and humility, he was able to recognize the Lord, and joyfully sang, not a farewell to life, but a hymn of thanks to the Saviour of the world, on the threshold of eternity (cf. Lk 2:25-32).

3. Precisely because old age is a time of life which needs to fulfil itself in active and loving engagement, adequate prominence and help should be given to all those "Movements" which assist the elderly to emerge from an attitude of mistrust, solitude and resignation, and to become rather dispensers of wisdom, witnesses of hope and workers of charity.

It is within the family that the elderly ought to find their first field of action. Their wisdom and experience are a treasure for the young married folk who, in the difficulties of early married life, can find in aged parents agreeable counsellors and confidants, while the children will find in the example and affectionate care of their grandparents something which will compensate for the absences of the parents, which, for various reasons, are so frequent today.

And this is not all: in the civil society itself, which has always entrusted the stable organization of its social arrangements, as well as the progress of necessary reforms, to mature persons, the elderly can still provide a stabilizing factor in working out the kind of co-existence that achieves renewal and advance, not by means of ruinous experiences, but by prudent and gradual development.

4. Workers in the social communications profession have a mission to fulfill in favour of the elderly which is ever so important; I should say, in fact, there is nothing else which can substitute for it. The media instruments in their hands, with their worldwide range of action and with their immediacy in getting messages across, can quickly and eloquently concentrate general attention and excite general reflection on the elderly and on their conditions of life. It is only when it is jerked into awareness, given a salutary shock, and then mobilized into taking appropriate action, that society can go about seeking ways and means to give effective solutions to the new needs.

Another contribution from the communications fraternity will be to correct among the young certain modes of thinking regarding the old, restoring to those of mature years and to the old a confidence of their own usefulness, and re-modelling the attitudes of society so that it will see the elderly at their true value. It is also in their power to give opportune reminders to public opinion that, alongside the problem of a "just wage", there also exists the problem of a "just pension" which equally requires attention as a demand of "social justice".

The fact is that modern cultural patterns in which an unbalanced emphasis is often given to economic productivity, efficiency, physical strength and beauty, personal comfort can have the effect of making the elderly seem burdensome, superfluous and useless, and of emarginating them from family and social life. A careful examination reveals that part of the responsibility for this situation may be attributed to certain attitudes of the mass media: if it is true that the media reflect the society in which they operate, it is no less true that they contribute to making it the sort of society which it is, and therefore, cannot be exempted from taking their share of the responsibility.

Media people are particularly well qualified to communicate widely a vision of the old, as outlined above, which is genuinely human and therefore also Christian: a vision of old age as a gift of God to the individual, to the family and to society. Authors, writers, producers, actors, can succeed, through the wonderful ways of the arts, in making such a vision understandable and attractive. All of us know the success they have achieved in other campaigns, conducted with finesse and perseverance.

5. These human and Christian attitudes, broadcast widely by the mass-media, will help the elderly to look upon this period of their life with serenity and acceptance, and to employ their intellectual, moral and physical energies, to whatever extent is possible, for the benefit of others, giving what help they can in projects of a humanitarian, educational, social or religious character; also to fill their long silences by means of culture and prayer. Their children will be persuaded that the ideal dwelling place for the elderly is within the family, or at least a place where they can be surrounded by the affection of its members, and made to feel sincerely accepted and loved and cared for.

The civil society, meanwhile, will be stimulated to adopt adequate systems of social security and assistance, which will take account not only of physical and material needs but also of those which are psychological and spiritual, so as to integrate the elderly once and for all into the community's benefits and allow them a full life. Generous persons will feel themselves called upon to give their time and energies to this cause, having recognized Christ Himself in their needy brother.

Beyond this work of animation the media workers, well aware that the elderly form a large and stable proportion of their public, especially as readers and users of radio and television, will take care to see that there are programmes and publications suitable for them, thus offering them not only recreational material, but also an assistance in their continuing education, a thing that is required at every age. Communicators will merit the special gratitude of the housebound and the sick for making it possible for them to participate with the People of God in liturgical services and other Church events.

In such transmissions it will naturally be necessary to keep in mind the needs and special sensibilities of the old, avoiding novelties which may upset them and showing respect for the sense of the sacred which old people possess in large measure and which constitutes in the Church a good which is worth preserving intact.

6. Let the elderly themselves be the first, on this World Communications Day specially devoted to their problems, to offer their prayers and sacrifices to the Lord that the Christian vision of old age may grow in the world.

As for those who are still in their childhood, those still in the vigour of their youth and the middle aged, may they look upon their elders with loving respect and gratitude.

May the communications people find joy and happiness in serving this noble and deserving cause with their wonderful talents and resources.

And may the Lord bless and sustain them all in their resolve.

With this wish, I gladly give my Apostolic Blessing to all those who work in the field of social communications, to all those who are responsible beneficiaries of their services, and especially to

the elderly. May it bring them copious gifts of tranquil joy and spiritual progress.

From the Vatican, 10 May 1982

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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