



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

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[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Old Age: 15. *Peter and John*

Dear brothers and sisters, welcome and good morning!

In our catechetical journey on old age, today we meditate on the dialogue between the risen Jesus and Peter at the end of John's Gospel (21:15-23). It is a moving dialogue, from which shines all the love of Jesus for his disciples, and also the sublime humanity of his relationship with them, in particular with Peter: a tender relationship, but not melancholic; direct, strong, free, and open. A relationship between men and *in truth*. Thus, John's Gospel, so spiritual, so lofty, closes with a poignant request and offer of love between Jesus and Peter, which is intertwined, quite naturally, with a discussion between them. The Evangelist alerts us: he is bearing witness to the truth of the facts (cf. *Jn* 21:24). And it is in the facts that the truth is to be sought.

We can ask ourselves: are we capable of preserving the tenor of this relationship of Jesus with the disciples, according to his style that is so open, so frank, so direct, so humanly real? How is our relationship with Jesus? Is it like this, like that of the Apostles with Him? Are we not, instead, very often tempted to enclose the testimony of the Gospel in the cocoon of a 'sugar-coated' revelation, to which is added our own circumstantial veneration? This attitude, which seems respectful, actually distances us from the real Jesus, and even becomes the occasion for a very abstract, very self-referential, very worldly journey of faith, which is not the path of Jesus. Jesus is the Word of God made man, and He comports Himself as man, He speaks to us as man, God-man. With

this tenderness, with this friendship, with this closeness. Jesus is not like the sugar-sweet image of the picture cards, no: Jesus is close to hand, he is near us.

In the course of Jesus' discussion with Peter, we find two passages that deal precisely with *old age and the passage of time*: the time of testimony, the time of life. The first passage is Jesus' warning to Peter: when you were young you were self-sufficient, when you are old you will no longer be so much the master of yourself and your life. Tell me I have to go in a wheelchair, eh? But that's how it is, that's life. With old age you get all these illnesses and we have to accept them as they come, don't we. We don't have the strength of youth! And *your witness will also be accompanied by this weakness*. You have to be a witness to Jesus even in weakness, illness and death. There is a beautiful passage from St Ignatius of Loyola that says: "Just as in life, so also in death we must bear witness as disciples of Jesus." The end of life must be an end of life of disciples: of disciples of Jesus, whom the Lord always speaks to us according to our age. The Evangelist adds his commentary, explaining that Jesus was alluding to the extreme witness, that of martyrdom and death.

But we can understand more generally the meaning of this admonition: your *sequela* [following in my footsteps] will have to learn to allow itself to be instructed and moulded by your *frailty*, your helplessness, your dependence on others, even in getting dressed, in walking. But you: "*Follow me*" (v. 19). The following of Jesus is always going forward, in good health, in not so good health; self-sufficient, without physical self-sufficiency. But the following of Jesus is important: to follow Jesus always, on your feet, running, going slowly, in a wheelchair... but always following Him. The wisdom of the following [of Jesus] must find the way to abide in its profession of faith – thus Peter responds: "Lord, you know that I love you" (vv. 15.16.17) – even in the limited conditions of weakness and old age. I like talking to the elderly, looking into their eyes: they have those bright eyes, those eyes that speak to you more than words, the witness of a life. And this is beautiful, we must preserve it until the end. Thus to follow Jesus: full of life.

This conversation between Jesus and Peter contains a valuable teaching for all disciples, for all of us believers, and also for all the elderly. From our frailty we learn to express the consistency of our witness of life in the conditions of a life largely entrusted to others, largely dependent on the initiative of others. With sickness, with old age, dependence grows and we are no longer as self-dependent as before; this grows and there too faith matures, there too Jesus is with us, there too that richness of the faith well lived on the road of life springs forth.

But again we must ask ourselves: do we have a *spirituality* truly capable of interpreting the season – now long and widespread – of this time of our weakness entrusted to others, that is greater than to the power of our autonomy? How do we remain faithful to the lived act of following [Jesus], to the promised love, to the justice sought in the time of our capacity for initiative, in the time of the fragility, in the time of dependence, of farewell, in the time of moving away from being the protagonist of our lives? It's not easy, is it? To move away from being the protagonist. It's not

easy.

This new time is also certainly a time of trial – beginning with the temptation – very human, undoubtedly, but also very insidious – to preserve our protagonism. And at times the protagonist has to diminish, has to lower himself, to accept that old age reduces you as protagonist. But you will have another way of expressing yourself, another way of participating in the family, in society, in the group of friends.

And it is curiosity that comes to Peter: “What about him?” says Peter, seeing the beloved disciple following them (cf. vv. 20-21). Sticking your nose in other people’s lives. But no: Jesus says: “Shut up!”. Does he have to part of “my” following [of Jesus]? Does he have to occupy “my” space? Will he be my successor? These are questions that do no good, that don’t help. Must he outlive me and take my place? Jesus’ answer is frank and even rude: “What does it matter to you? You worry about your own life, about your present situation, and don’t stick your nose into the lives of others. What does it matter to you? You follow me” (v. 22).

This is important: the following of Jesus, to follow Jesus in life and in death, in health and in sickness, in life when it is prosperous with many successes, and in life when it is difficult, in many bad moments of failing. And when we want to insert ourselves into other people’s lives, Jesus answers, “What does it matter to you? You follow me.” Beautiful.

We old people should not be envious of young people who take their path, who occupy our place, who outlive us. The honour of our faithfulness to sworn love, fidelity to the following of the faith we have believed, even in the conditions that bring them nearer to the end of their life, is our claim to admiration of the generations to come and of grateful recognition from the Lord. Learning to take leave: this is the wisdom of the elderly. But to say farewell well, carefully, with a smile, to take one’s leave in society, to take one’s leave with others. The life of the elderly is a farewell, slow, slow, but a joyful farewell: I have lived life, I have kept my faith. This is beautiful, when an elderly person can say, “I have lived life, this is my family; I have lived life, I was a sinner but I have also done good.” And this peace that comes, this is the farewell of the elder.

Even the forcibly inactive following [of Jesus], made up of enthusiastic contemplation and rapt listening to the word of the Lord – like that of Mary, the sister of Lazarus – will become the best part of their lives, of the lives of us elderly persons. May this part never be taken from us again, never (cf. *Lk* 10:42). Let us look to the elderly, let us look upon them, and let us help them so that they may live and express their wisdom of life, that they may give us what is beautiful and good in them. Let us look at them, let us listen to them. And we elders, let us look at the young, and always with a smile, at the young: they will follow the path, they will carry forward what we have sown, even what we have not sown because we have not had the courage or the opportunity: they will carry it forward. But always this relationship.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially those from Malta and the United States of America. I offer a special greeting to the many student groups present. Upon all of you, and upon your families, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you!

APPEALS

In the past few hours, an earthquake has claimed victims and caused extensive damage in Afghanistan. I express my sympathy to the injured and those affected by the earthquake, and I pray in particular for those who have lost their lives and for their families. I hope that with everyone's help, the suffering of the dear Afghan people can be alleviated.

I also express my sorrow and dismay at the killing, in Mexico the day before yesterday, of two Jesuit religious – my confreres – and a layman. How many killings there are in Mexico! With affection and prayer, I am close to the Catholic community affected by this tragedy. Once again, I repeat that violence does not solve problems, but increases unnecessary suffering.

The children who were with me in the Popemobile were Ukrainian children: let us not forget Ukraine. Let us not forget the suffering of that martyred people.

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 the words of the Risen Jesus to Peter at the Lake of Tiberias (*Jn* 21:17-18). Peter reaffirms his love for Christ and receives the command to feed the Lord's sheep. Jesus adds, with a reference to Peter's eventual martyrdom: "When you were younger, you used to go wherever you wished; but when you grow old, another will take you where you would not go". These words have a particular meaning for the elderly, since the passing of the years naturally entails physical frailty and heightened dependence on others. At the same time, however, old age can be a time of renewed love for the Lord, hope in his promises, and growth in spiritual wisdom. Jesus goes on to tell Peter not to concern himself with John, the younger disciple, but with persevering in fidelity to his own calling and mission. His words remind us of the need, in life's later years, to make room for the younger generations and to respect their place in the unfolding of

the Lord's saving plan. For Christ's disciples, old age can thus be a fruitful season of contemplation, gratitude and witness to the grace of God constantly at work in our lives and in the world around us.