

## Article

# The Value of Old Age in the Teaching of Pope Francis

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**Abstract:** The demographic changes taking place before our eyes regarding the structure of our society show that the proportion of older people is increasing quite rapidly. Very often these are people who want to be involved in the life of the family, society, and the Church, although their presence and involvement is not always viewed positively by the younger generations. On the other hand, the time of old age is a difficult time with many challenges, such as loss of health, and consequently the elderly need the support of the younger generations. This reality is also recognised by Pope Francis, and it could be said that the problem of the elderly is close to his heart. An expression of the importance and value of older people is, for example, his frequent meetings with older people, the establishment of a World Day for Grandparents and Older Persons, or the series of catechesis on old age and the value of this time in people's lives delivered in 2022. Taking into account these aspects of social change and based on the totality of Pope Francis' teachings addressed to the elderly, we wish to highlight distinctive elements emphasising the value of the elderly in the life of the family, society, and the Church. Starting from the presentation of the family as the best and natural environment for living during the time of old age, these teachings highlight older people as "guardians" of roots and values, the importance of intergenerational dialogue and a type of "covenant of generations", and the importance of older people in the life of the Church. An important element of Francis' teachings on old age is to identify this period as a "time of grace", a time of looking at life from the perspective of the years and trying to take stock of it, and a time of thanksgiving. All of this is done to emphasise the importance and value of the time of old age and to see and appreciate their presence in the life of the family, society, and the Church.

**Keywords:** old age; grandparents; family; society; faith; Church; Francis



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## 1. Introduction

One of the important initiatives Pope Francis took in the Year of the Family that he declared was the establishment of the feast of the *World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly* (Pope Francis 2020c)<sup>1</sup>. The Day was established and announced on the day preceding the liturgical *Day of the Presentation of the Lord*. Pope Francis emphasised it by saying "The Day of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple when Simeon and Anna, both the elderly, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, recognised Jesus as the Messiah. The Holy Spirit still stirs up thoughts and words of wisdom in the elderly today: their voice is precious because it sings the praises of God and safeguards the roots of peoples. They remind us that old age is a gift and that grandparents are the link between generations, passing on the experience of life and faith to the young. Grandparents are often forgotten and we forget this wealth of preserving roots and passing on" (Pope Francis 2021a). Pope Francis wants the *World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly* to be celebrated throughout the Church each year on the fourth Sunday of July, around the time of the commemoration of Saints Simeon and Anna, the "grandparents" of Jesus (Pope Francis 2021a).

The predecessors of Pope Francis also emphasised the significance of this period of a person's life and pointed to the challenges and tasks facing grandparents and the elderly by holding meetings in retirement homes and care homes and addressing them with special teachings and guidance. The *Letter to the Elderly* by John Paul II (Pope John Paul II 1999)

as well as Benedict XVI's discussion of the topic of grandparents and the elderly during his meeting with families from all parts of the world in Valencia in 2006<sup>2</sup> are especially noteworthy in this context.

Given the presence of the topic of the elderly in the constant teaching of the Church in recent decades and the fact that nearly all countries celebrate Grandfather's Day and Grandmother's Day<sup>3</sup> as secular holidays, we would like to reflect on why the announcement of the Day for Grandparents and the Elderly by Pope Francis was such an important part of the Year of the Family. He emphasised that he "wished to establish the feast of grandparents on the last Sunday of July. The covenant between the two poles of the generations of life—children and the elderly—also helps the other two—young people and adults—to bond with each other and make everyone's existence richer in humanity. Here is a need for dialogue between the generations: if there is no dialogue between young people and the elderly, if there is no dialogue, each generation remains isolated and cannot transmit the message" (Pope Francis 2022b). Has the situation of the elderly, as well as the tasks and challenges facing them in recent years, changed so much as to make this initiative necessary again? It seems so, as Pope Francis notes that "old age is one of the most urgent issues facing the human family at this time" (Pope Francis 2022a). Since this is the case, based on Francis' teaching, especially the cycle of catechesis on old age<sup>4</sup>, we would like to point out that despite the changes taking place in society, the elderly are valuable in family and social life and can still give much to society.

Using the method of analysing source texts of Pope Francis' teachings on old age as well as with reference to the literature on the subject (Brzeziński 2018; Kućko 2022; Ozorowski 2021; Szafulski 2020; Lewicka 2019), we aim to show the importance of older people in family and social life despite the spreading culture of utilitarianism and hedonism. The starting point will be to identify the family as an environment for experiencing old age and, at the same time, to show the importance of the presence of older people in family life as 'guardians of memory' and as transmitters of history, tradition, and values. Another element is to show the importance of intergenerational dialogue. In today's multicultural and pluralistic society, dialogue is increasingly becoming the basis for understanding others. Intergenerational dialogue can be the beginning of a path of mutual understanding and openness to others. Finally, we also want to show that the quality of life in society depends on the way older people are treated and received by society. We intend to achieve these goals by analysing Pope Francis' teachings on old age.

## 2. Family as the Environment for Experiencing Old Age

As we address the subject of the elderly in family and social life, we undoubtedly need to specify the place and environment in which old age is experienced. Pope Francis confirms John Paul II's suggestion that as the family is the primary place for the birth, growth, upbringing, and development of a human being, so is it the primary place for the experience of old age. The family home is where an old person is with his or her relatives, feels loved, and can give love to others (Pope John Paul II 1999, pp. 11–13; Cf. Ozorowski 2021, pp. 120–21). According to Francis, there is no better place, no better environment where a person can live their old age, as his words confirm: "Blessed is the home in which the elderly are cared for! Blessed is the family that honours the grandparents!" (Pope Francis 2022i). Caring for the elderly is, in Francis' opinion, a source of blessing for the family and the home that makes the effort to care for an elderly person, even though it often involves a lot of strain and hard work. This attitude towards elderly parents and grandparents is a fundamental way of expressing grateful love to parents for the gift of life, upbringing, and love they have received from them and to grandparents for supporting parents in their upbringing and creating an atmosphere of love and respect towards each individual. It is therefore necessary to "reawaken our collective sense of gratitude, appreciation, and hospitality that enable the elderly to feel like a living part of the community. The elderly are men and women, mothers and fathers who have walked the same road before us, in our house, in our everyday struggle for a dignified life" (Pope Francis 2016, p. 191). One can

say more that how the older generation is treated today will be how they will be treated in the future when they reach their old age (Pope Francis 2015a). Therefore, as we speak about the family circumstances of the elderly, we can still say today that “most families have great respect for the elderly, surrounding them with affection and considering them a blessing” (Pope Francis 2016, p. 48). However, Francis stresses that “in highly industrialised societies, where the number of elderly persons is growing even as the birth rate declines, they can be regarded as a burden. [...] care and concern for the final stages of life is all the more necessary today when contemporary society attempts to remove every trace of death and dying” (Pope Francis 2016, p. 48; Cf. Szafulski 2020, p. 97)). Moreover, family is the environment that helps to preserve the identity and sense of belonging of every person. Francis says: “Society benefits when each person and social group feels truly at home. In a family, parents, grandparents and children all feel at home; no one is excluded. [...] In families, everyone contributes to the common purpose; everyone works for the common good, not denying each person’s individuality but encouraging and supporting it” (Pope Francis 2020b, p. 230; Cf. Szafulski 2020, p. 98). It is especially important today, as there are cultures in the contemporary world that “in the wake of disordered industrial and urban development, have both in the past and the present set the elderly aside in unacceptable ways” (Pope John Paul II 1981, p. 27; Cf. Pope Francis 2016, p. 192), where the elderly become an “unnecessary burden” on society. Therefore, it becomes necessary to change this mentality and this way of treating older people. There is also an obligation to create the best conditions for older people to be able to, as far as possible, experience this period in life in an environment they know, with everyday friendships, in the family home, surrounded by loved ones. The family and home are the environment that makes the natural choice for every human being (Cf. Pontifical Academy for Life 2021; Cf. Lewicka 2019, pp. 102–4). It should be borne in mind, however, that in certain situations it is necessary to resort to hospitalisation or placement of an older person in a care facility in order to provide appropriate and high-quality care that cannot be provided at home. There is no way to deny that, while in the past, large and multi-generational families were able to organise the care for older family members at home, nowadays, the altered structure of family units and the complex demands of work that keep adults away from home, have caused the care for the elderly to become a completely new challenge. In some poor social contexts, the institutional solution can provide a concrete answer to the problem of having no home of one’s own. It is increasingly common for the elderly to decide to move to a retirement home in search of a company. Others do it because the dominant culture forces them to feel like a burden and inconvenience to their children or relatives (Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). There are certain family situations associated with the presence of the elderly at home that require solutions that make home care, placement in a care home, or even a hospice, likely. In some situations, being at home no longer offers sufficient possibilities of providing the elderly person with adequate care. In such cases, one must not allow oneself to become entrapped by the “throwaway culture”, which may manifest itself as laziness and a lack of creativity in seeking effective solutions at times when old age is associated with the loss of autonomy. Placing human beings, their needs, and rights at the centre is an expression of progress, civilisation, and authentic Christian conscience (Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). Placing an elderly person in a facility should entail maintaining that person’s sense of belonging in the family, the sense of being loved, ensuring regular contact, and visiting the person as often as possible. The family should not allow itself, for the sake of everyone’s well-being, to lose the spirit of human fellowship and human sensitivity; otherwise, it will lose the truth of humanity within itself (Cf. Pope Francis 2022e). Above all, the elderly need the care of family members, whose feelings cannot be replaced by the most efficient structures or the most competent and kindest health care professionals. The elderly who are not self-sufficient or who suffer from advanced or terminal illnesses can enjoy truly humane care and receive adequate responses to their needs thanks to palliative care offered as a supplement and support to the care provided by family members. Palliative care aims to alleviate suffering at the final stage of an illness and to provide the ill person with

appropriate human companionship (Cf. [Pope John Paul II 1995](#), p. 65). This support is important, especially for the elderly who, due to their age, receive less and less attention from therapeutic medicine, and who are often abandoned. Abandonment is the most serious “disease” affecting the elderly and the greatest injustice they can experience. Those who helped us grow up cannot be abandoned when they need our help, our love, and our tenderness (Cf. [Pope Francis 2015b](#)). However, there are situations in which older people have no family where they can live out the last years of their lives. In such situations, retirement homes, homes for the elderly where they can live out the last years of their lives with dignity, become the solution. As Pope Francis emphasised, care homes and homes for the elderly should be, so to speak, the “lungs” of humanity, or “sanctuaries” of humanity, where elderly and frail persons are provided with care and nurtured like older brothers or sisters ([Pope Francis 2014](#); Cf. [Szafulski 2020](#), p. 98; [Lewicka 2019](#), pp. 104–5). All this makes the need to support families even more apparent, as sometimes they are unable to cope with the exhausting responsibility of caring for a seriously ill person, which entails a high energy and financial cost. A wider network of solidarity becomes necessary. It does not have to be necessarily and exclusively based on blood ties, but it should be articulated according to friendship affiliations, shared feelings, and mutual generosity in responding to the needs of others. The breakdown of social relationships affects the elderly in particular; as they age and experience the onset of physical and cognitive fragility, they often have no reference data and no people they can rely on to solve the problems they face in their lives (Cf. [Pontifical Academy for Life 2021](#)).

### 3. “Guardians of the Roots”: The Elderly in Social Life

Another aspect of Francis’ teaching on old age is to see older people of value as transmitters of history, traditions, family, religious, and national values, in other words as ‘guardians of the roots’<sup>5</sup> from which we have all grown. In his view of old age, Pope Francis points out that old age is a gift for all stages of life. It is the gift of maturity and wisdom arising from life experiences (Cf. [Pope Francis 2015a, 2022a](#); [Lewicka 2019](#), pp. 107–8). It is clear that, for the Pope, they are a gift to the family, society, and the Church as the very guardians and transmitters of what was, as the foundation of what is. As part of their history, they carry with them the history of the family, the community in which they have lived and live, the nation, and the Church. Hence, Pope Francis encourages the elderly, or even appeals to them, to be the “guardians of memory” ([Pope Francis 2019](#), p. 196; Cf. [Ozorowski 2021](#), pp. 120–21). Being “the guardians of collective memory”, transmitting history and faith, and caring for the young generation are also presented by Pope Francis as the special vocation and task of the elderly ([Pope Francis 2021b](#)). This is because the memory of people, events, and things of the past are, in a sense, the foundation on which the present and the future of humanity are built. The “wealth of years” is the wealth of all people who have lived a long life and who have experience and history. It is a priceless treasure that is formed during the life journey of every man and woman, regardless of their background, economic, and social circumstances. This is because life is a gift, and long life is a privilege for the person concerned and others (Cf. [Pope Francis 2020a](#)). If, therefore, the elders are a treasure trove carrying the riches of history, it is the responsibility of the young to make skilful use of this treasure of history and build on it for the present and the future.

It is also worth noting that Pope Francis sees the past, history, and roots from which we have grown not as “a nostalgic reminiscence of the past, or anchors chaining us to past times and preventing us from facing the present and creating something new. Instead, they are a fixed point from which we can grow and meet new challenges. They provide the courage to meet our culture with realism and love and fill it with the Gospel” ([Pope Francis 2019](#), p. 200). Therefore, it would be a mistake to think that history and roots can be rejected with no detriment to the present. On the one hand, Pope Francis says that “the lack of historical memory is a serious shortcoming in our society”. On the other hand, “knowing and judging past events is the only way to build a meaningful future. [...] Listening to the elderly tell their stories is good for children and young people; it makes them feel connected

to the living history of their families, their neighbourhoods, and their country. A family that fails to respect and cherish its grandparents, who are its living memory, is already in decline, whereas a family that remembers has a future. [...] Our contemporary experience of being orphans as a result of cultural discontinuity, uprootedness, and the collapse of the certainties that shape our lives, challenges us to make our families places where children can sink roots in the rich soil of a collective history" (Pope Francis 2016, p. 193). Preserving memory is necessary for preserving the future of the family, as memory opens it to the future and "can help to build a more humane and welcoming world. Without memory, however, we will never be able to build; without a foundation, we can never build a house. Never. And the foundation of life is memory" (Pope Francis 2021b). For this reason, Pope Francis points out that the elderly "remind us that old age is a gift and that grandparents are the link between generations, passing on the experience of life and faith to the young. Grandparents are often forgotten and we forget this wealth of preserving roots and passing on" (Pope Francis 2021a). This is the task that the elderly are so keen to perform.

Rejecting the roots, ignoring history, rejecting experience, or even having contempt for the elderly and looking only to the future leads only to uprootedness, distrust of all that is past, and trusting only the future made up of promises and devoid of values. According to Pope Francis, this is the building of society along ideological lines, having the young generations reject spiritual wealth, human values, and history transmitted from generation to generation, to direct them and subject them to ideological assumptions (Pope Francis 2019, p. 181). Discarding values by rejecting history and roots inevitably leads to a lack of meaning that throws away all ethical responsibility and all attachment to true good. Thus, society becomes the "society of fatigue" that tolerates a "selective healthcare market" that leads to the "gentle" death of the elderly and ill, which denotes euthanasia but also abortion. The rejection of the elderly leads to the elimination of their life wisdom, which is a completely different thing than progress and scientific breakthroughs (Cf. Pope Francis 2022g; Cf. Szafulski 2020, pp. 98–99). The rejection of the elderly opens the way to relativising the value of human life; meanwhile, the contemporary world needs young people who are strong and older people who are wise (Cf. Pope Francis 2022c). Therefore, the care for preserving roots and for history, expressed in the care for the elderly and the remembrance of their experience, is necessary for the good of society and also ensures that the experience and history of the present generations are not wasted or lost (Cf. Pope Francis 2022e; Cf. Szafulski 2020, pp. 101–2). It is therefore clear from Francis' words that society can only build its future by building on the past, the values and traditions handed down by older people, and by drawing on their wealth of wisdom. Of course, the use of these assets must be prudent and adapted to the requirements of today's society. They are no less indispensable for preserving the identity of the family, society, and the human person.

#### 4. The Importance of Intergenerational Dialogue

An important element in today's changing society and its development, as well as mutual understanding, is dialogue, including inter-personal dialogue, cultural dialogue, and inter-religious dialogue. The beginning of such a dialogue at the social level can and should be the dialogue born in the family home, especially through intergenerational dialogue. Different generations, with different views on the same or similar subjects, open themselves up to mutual understanding and acceptance by engaging in dialogue on the basis of love. Intergenerational dialogue taking place in the family can and should be the foundation of dialogue in social life. It is the conversations between grandparents and grandchildren as well as between parents and children. Intergenerational dialogue provides the basis for the transmission of history and values. Pope Francis has emphasised the need for this dialogue many times, on the one hand pointing to the responsibility of grandparents for the transmission of history, tradition, and values, and stressing that their very presence bears witness to the grandchildren that history does not begin with them, while, on the other hand, underscoring the need for the young to respect past events and



pointing to young people's responsibility in being the heirs of history, which implies the need to know and appreciate it. Intergenerational dialogue is essential in family and social life alike, as its breakdown will consequently entail a loss of the ability to build family and social relationships, let alone relationships of a lasting nature (Cf. [Pope Francis 2016](#), p. 192). What is more, Pope Francis points out that a lack of attachment to one's roots, which are represented by grandparents and history, including the history of the family and nation, translates into a lack of the strength required for healthy development, due to the absence of valuable points of reference (Cf. [Pope Francis 2022b](#)). Therefore, "it is important for grandparents to meet their grandchildren and for grandchildren to meet their grandparents" ([Pope Francis 2021a](#)) in a loving and kind dialogue. The future of man and the nation by necessity presupposes the dialogue and meeting between the elderly and the young, for the sake of building a fairer, more beautiful, more supportive, and more Christian society. Young people are the strength of the human journey, while the elderly reinforce that strength with their memory and wisdom. The elderly and grandparents have an extraordinary ability to comprehend the most problematic situations; therefore, they are, in a way, entrusted with the task of passing on life experience and the history of the family and community (Cf. [Francesco 2019](#)). Therefore, one should not give in to cultural pressure and a certain "political correctness" of rejection of history and things of the past, as if a man was born yesterday, says Pope Francis (Cf. [Pope Francis 2022d](#)). History is important, as it allows one to understand who one is and how one has got to the present moment, what the content of one's present should be, and how one should shape one's future in order not to lose one's identity. Hence, it seems necessary to continually foster intergenerational relationships. The future of the nation and society requires an encounter between the young and the old, as the young represent their vitality on the journey, while the elderly strengthen that vitality with memory and wisdom (Cf. [Francesco 2016](#)). According to Pope Francis, walking this shared way in dialogue between the older and younger people allows for being "firmly rooted in the present, and from here, revisit the past and look to the future. To revisit the past to learn from history and heal old wounds that at times still trouble us. To look to the future to nourish our enthusiasm, cause dreams to emerge, awaken prophecies, and enable hope to blossom" ([Pope Francis 2019](#), pp. 193, 199; Cf. [Pontifical Academy for Life 2021](#)). Therefore, the meeting and intergenerational dialogue serve the young as well as the older generations. It serves human and social development.

The testimony of grandparents "that it is possible to emerge renewed from an experience of hardship" ([Pope Francis 2021b](#)) is another important element of intergenerational dialogue. It is undeniable that every generation, and every person, goes through various trials and hardships related to personal, family, professional, and social life. It seems especially important to witness and experience the ability and skill to overcome trials and hardships, especially for the young generation of our time, which gets discouraged quickly and easily and surrenders to various difficulties, often without even attempting to overcome them. Therefore, "the young must converse with the elderly, and the elderly with the young. And this bridge will be the transmission of wisdom in humanity" ([Pope Francis 2022a](#); Cf. [Kučko 2022](#), p. 386). By witnessing the overcoming of trials and hardships, the elderly are also demonstrating that love is the force that enables them to accomplish these things and that life without love is meaningless, empty, and sterile. Therefore, they should not concentrate on themselves and on selfish taking, but on the skill of giving in love and on the ability to love others with actions, not just with words ([Pope Francis 2019](#), p. 197).

Pope Francis also suggests that intergenerational dialogue provides an opportunity to overcome some social stereotypes about the elderly and the young generation. On the one hand, it enables young people to stop seeing the elderly from the perspective of their old age, illness, infirmity, dependence, or fear caused by the loss of their roles in society. It enables them to see the elderly not only in terms of the costs that society pays due to the need to care for them. It is worth remembering that the elderly had worked in their professions for many years to acquire family and social goods. That dialogue also enables the young to see that the elderly are not an obstacle to their own employment or

development. On the contrary, this dialogue makes it easier to discover that the human person is worth more than material possessions. This dialogue makes it easier to resist the throwaway culture, which leads to pushing the human being out of the centre of social life when that human being, due to age, illness, or loss of independence, can no longer participate in the life of the family and society the way he or she did before (Cf. [Francesco 2019](#)). The intergenerational dialogue opens up and helps to build a culture and society that has human beings in its centre, including human beings who are old, ill, and in need of support and compassion.

It is also worth noting that in building a culture of intergenerational dialogue, the ability to notice human weakness, including the physical weakness of the elderly, is an element of building a more humane society, one that is open to the human being who needs support. That support, understanding, and dialogue is needed not only by the elderly but also by young people affected by illness and suffering or threatened by exclusion for various other reasons, such as migration<sup>6</sup>. It is therefore worth noting that the weakness of the elderly is, in a way, a provocation. The elderly, who are often dependent on others, provoke the young to accept dependence on others as a way of coping with life. They also provoke them to help and take actions directed at the good of others. They provoke a change in the mentality that sees weakness as something that should be rejected. Meanwhile, weakness resulting from old age and illness enables one to touch the fragility of human life and opens one up to the understanding of its value and dignity. Therefore, a society that is able to receive the weakness and fragility of human life offers hope of a better future by respecting the value of every human life (Cf. [Pontifical Academy for Life 2021](#)).

The final element of intergenerational dialogue we would like to highlight is respect, especially the respect of the young generation for the older generation. To Pope Francis, respect becomes the basis of the truth of dialogue and mutual relations. As he said during a General Audience: “Where there is no honour for the elderly, there is no future for the young” ([Pope Francis 2015a](#)). Moreover, it can be said that the lack of respect for the elderly is a lack of respect for the young who fail to show it to the elderly (Cf. [Pope Francis 2022f](#)). Those who take advantage of the weakness of the sick and old (Cf. [Pope Francis 2022h](#)) and who fail to respect the elderly and the weak should feel ashamed. In the *Christus vivit* adhortation, addressed to young people, Pope Francis wrote, relating to the Biblical message: “The Bible never ceases to insist that profound respect be shown to the elderly since they have a wealth of experience; they have known success and failure, life’s joys and afflictions, its dreams and disappointments. In the silence of their heart, they have a store of experiences that can teach us not to make mistakes or be taken in by false promises. [...] It is unhelpful to buy into the cult of youth or foolishly dismiss others simply because they are older or from another generation. Jesus tells us that the wise can bring forth from their store things both new and old (cf. Mt 13, 52). A wise young person is open to the future, yet still capable of learning something from the experience of others” ([Pope Francis 2019](#), p. 16; Cf. [Pontifical Academy for Life 2021](#)). Respect for the elderly, therefore, becomes an indicator of the wisdom gained by the younger generations; at the same time, it can become an assurance that, since the young treat the elderly with respect today, they will be respected by the young generations too once they reach old age.

At the end of this section, it is worth pointing to the basic component of the possibility of implementing dialogue between generations and ensuring that this dialogue is fruitful. It seems obvious, but in the modern “busy” world, where we constantly hear that time is short, Pope Francis points to the wisdom and skill of “wasting time”. This means finding time for conversations, finding time for other people and for loved ones, hearing their needs, and “wasting time” with them. One needs to spend time, “waste time” with other people, with loved ones, with children, and the elderly, as this seemingly wasted time makes a person adopt a different view of life, of oneself, and of another human being (Cf. [Pope Francis 2013, 2022b](#); Cf. [Kučko 2022](#), p. 391). Time is given to people so that it can be used in the best possible way, and one of the most precious gifts that we can give to others is precisely the time when we are with them and for them. Thus, the thing that

Pope Francis calls “wasting time” can become and becomes the gift of love. The challenge and duty to be met today in families, society, and the Church in building relationships, intergenerational dialogue, as well as social dialogue becomes the ability to find and offer time to others.

## 5. Old Age and the Quality of Society

In the space of family and social life, the topics of quality of social life and the factors that influence this quality are increasingly being addressed. Many of the aspects that speak to the quality of social life concern issues related to material matters, economic matters, or economic development. However, an extremely important element that affects the quality of social life is the quality of interpersonal relationships, including attitudes towards the elderly and sick.

For Pope Francis, it is fundamental to approach and point out that the quality of social life, as well as the value of social life, depends on how older people are treated by the rest of society. Following Francis’ thinking, we can also say that how older people are treated in society tells us what kind of society it is. So what does the Pope want to point out when he teaches about the quality of society and the relationship to older people?

The fundamental issue that, according to Pope Francis, informs us about the quality of a society is “sensitivity to the elderly as an essential feature of civilisation”. Analysing Francis’ teachings on the relationship that exists between the quality of society and the treatment of the elderly, it should be noted that for the Pope “sensitivity to the elderly is an essential feature of civilisation” (Pope Francis 2016, p. 192; 2015a). This sensitivity gives rise to, as it were, the social obligation to care for the elderly, who are more numerous and who, more and more often, are lonely and abandoned even by their closest relatives. Therefore, providing every assistance to the elderly and giving up on the so-called throwaway culture (Cf. Pope Francis 2022h) arise as social challenges crucial for the preservation of culture and respect for life. In one of his catecheses, Pope Francis recalls the statement made by Pope Benedict XVI during a meeting at a home for the elderly: “The quality of a society, I mean of a civilization, is also judged by how it treats the elderly and by the place it gives them in community life” (12 November 2012). Those who make room for the elderly make room for life! Those who welcome the elderly welcome life! (Benedict XVI 2012; Cf. Pope Francis 2015a) Thus, we can conclude that sensitivity to the elderly is an important feature of civilisation and that only the civilisation that shows respect to the elderly, protects them, and cares for them, will flourish. Meanwhile, a civilisation that has no place for the elderly or rejects them, will gradually collapse (Cf. Pope Francis 2015a). Therefore, Pope Francis says that the civilisation of life cannot be afraid of old age, hide it, or marginalise it (Cf. Pope Francis 2022h). Such behaviour towards the elderly opens the way to the “throwaway culture” (Cf. Pope Francis 2022i). The culture “coupled with contempt for old age, seen as frailty, as decay or disability, has been the dominant image of 20th-century totalitarianism” (Pope Francis 2022a). In the throwaway culture and in a society that accepts this culture, where the elderly are pushed to the margins and suffer because of this, there are also many who take advantage of the age of the elderly, cheat them, and intimidate them. Even in families, the elderly are thrown out and placed in homes for the elderly, and their children do not visit them there. To Pope Francis, the throwaway culture is a form of society’s cowardice (Cf. Pope Francis 2022h). Francis remarks that society has somehow grown “accustomed to throwing people away. We want to remove our growing fear of weakness and vulnerability; but by doing so we increase in the elderly the anxiety of being poorly tolerated and neglected” (Pope Francis 2015a; cf. Lewicka 2019, p. 101). This is fear and cowardice in the face of the challenge of caring for those who have built that society and whom we now want to throw away from it. This is why renewing “the alliance between generations, which restores all ages of life to the human” (Pope Francis 2022a) becomes a challenge to society today. To Pope Francis, this means not only some aid schemes and support but, above all, creating plans for older people that would let them “live to the full” (Pope Francis 2022a). This means that, at the level of society, the elderly should not



be regarded as a burden but as resources and wealth, which is what they really are. This is evidenced, for example, by their engagement in voluntary activities, which provide valuable opportunities to experience the dimension of selflessness. Voluntary service is a positive experience for those who benefit from it, as well as for those who provide it. In fact, being engaged in the work for others can counteract the sense of loneliness, improve cognitive abilities, and improve psychological well-being. Engagement in volunteering promotes “active ageing”, helps improve the quality of life (Cf. [Francesco 2019](#)), and makes the elderly feel useful to society, as they can still contribute to its development. The growing engagement of the elderly in volunteering and associations becomes the optimal ground for the development of a supportive community and the civilisation of life. It demonstrates that the elderly not only have needs but also contribute significantly to the quality of social life (Cf. [Francesco 2019](#)).

Therefore, considering what the elderly can still contribute to social life, for the sake of its good and development, it seems necessary to shape social attitudes and mentality, especially in the young generations, to be sensitive to the elderly, to value their lives, and to appreciate what the elderly have contributed and are still contributing to the life of society, thus improving its quality. It is thus not only a matter of placing them in care institutions but also of accompanying them, shaping and providing proper support in the family, social, and spiritual life to the elderly, while fully respecting their dignity (Cf. [Pontifical Academy for Life 2021](#)). It should be done so that the elderly can still feel loved and not become a burden to anyone, especially their closest relatives. Since the number of the elderly in society is growing, it is important to make sure that our cities are inclusive and welcoming to older people and all other forms of weakness (Cf. [Pontifical Academy for Life 2021](#)). Because the way in which older people are treated and related to says what kind of society it is, it is therefore necessary to shape social relations in such a way that older people are treated with the dignity they deserve and with the necessary care and concern, so that society can be said to be a society with a truly human face.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on the rich teachings of Pope Francis on the subject of old age and the goal set at the beginning of this article of showing the value and importance of the elderly in social life, this analysis of papal statements, especially his cycle of catechesis on old age, has made it possible to see some important aspects of this period of life and to appreciate the value of the elderly in family and social relationships, intergenerational dialogue, and the transmission of values as ‘guardians of the roots’. By addressing the theme of old age and establishing the Feast of Grandparents and the Elderly, Francis wants to draw our attention to several important aspects of this period of life. In the first place, the contribution of the elderly to the wider good of society should be highlighted and appreciated, starting with the primary community of the family, in which the old person should spend the last years and days of his or her life, through the community in which he or she lives. As Francis pointed out in his Message for the First World Day of Grandparents and Older Persons, it is important to be together in families, to visit (Cf. [Pope Francis 2022b](#)), to be with one another and for one another “to accompany old age until its end” ([Pope Francis 2022a](#)). Second is identifying the importance of intergenerational dialogue and of the values that older people can and should pass on to the young as the “guardians of roots”, history, and values. The need for that dialogue, according to Pope Francis, arises from the fact that “a society in which the elderly do not speak with the young, the young do not speak with the elderly, adults do not speak with neither the elderly nor young people, is a sterile society, without a future, a society that does not look to the horizon but rather looks at itself” ([Pope Francis 2022b](#)). The elderly are the presence of history and family, and, as Pope Francis says, it is a matter of honour to show the truth about life and its stages to the young. Love for the human person, which is common to all and includes the honouring of a lived experience, is not a concern for old people. It should rather be the ambition of the young to inherit the best traits, to live in the fullness of humanity (Cf. [Pope Francis 2022f](#)), and to be able to

respect its dignity at every stage, also in the weakness and disability associated with old age or illness. Finally, Pope Francis points out that the quality of society and civilisation in which we live depends on the sensitivity to the elderly and the weak while stressing, at the same time, that sensitivity to the elderly and the weak determines the quality of a society and civilisation. Pope Francis expressed it in the following way: “the challenge of humanity and civilisation requires our commitment and God’s help” (Pope Francis 2022a) in caring for the elderly. Therefore, it follows from Francis’ teaching that it is necessary to develop intergenerational dialogue in order to build a quality society.

An analysis of the texts of Pope Francis’ speeches on old age allows us to see other areas that are certainly also part of the content of the lives of the elderly, such as the issues of religion, faith, gratitude to God for the gift of life, life and involvement in the Church, and looking at old age as a time of recapitulation and a kind of examination of conscience. These, too, because of their importance in the teaching of Pope Francis and in the lives of the elderly, will be deepened, so that the joint effort of young and old will open up the building of a society with a human face.

As we recall Pope Francis’s words “the elderly are the messengers of tenderness, the elderly are the messengers of the wisdom of lived experience” (Pope Francis 2022f), it seems necessary to provide the elderly with proper conditions to spend the final years of their life in the family as well as in society, to appreciate their contribution to the development of the family and society, to respect their weakness, and to be sensitive to their needs for development and progress of the culture and civilisation of life. All should be done to build a civilisation of life open to every human being.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Pope Francis proclaimed the Year of the Family during his Angelus meeting on 27 December 2020, and it ran from 19 March 2021 to June 2022 and culminated at the World Meeting of Families in Rome.
- <sup>2</sup> The topic of transmission of faith in the family was addressed during the meeting, with emphasis on the special role of grandparents in fulfilling this task. See <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/it/travels/2006/outside/documents/valencia.html> (accessed on 23 November 2021); <http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/laityfamilylife/it/sezione-famiglia/incontri-mondiali-delle-famiglie.html> (accessed on 23 November 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> In Poland, Grandmother’s Day has been celebrated since the second half of the 1960s on 21 January, while Grandfather’s Day has been celebrated since the 1980s on 22 January. See <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/dzien-babci-i-dziadka-2021-kiedy-obchodzimy-swieto-dziadkow-6598843104844672a> (accessed on 23 November 2021); <https://www.mjakmama24.pl/mama/impreszy/kiedy-jest-dzien-babci-i-dziadka-aa-SwXG-QYYL-AHYZ.html> (accessed on 23 November 2021).
- <sup>4</sup> The cycle of 18 catecheses on old age was delivered by Pope Francis between 23 February 2022 and 24 August 2022.
- <sup>5</sup> In the *Letter to the elderly*, nn. 9–10, John Paul II called the elderly the guardians of collective memory. He wrote: “The elderly help us to see human affairs with greater wisdom, because life’s vicissitudes have brought them knowledge and maturity. They are the guardians of our collective memory, and thus the privileged interpreters of that body of ideals and common values which support and guide life in society. To exclude the elderly is in a sense to deny the past, in which the present is firmly rooted, in the name of a modernity without memory. Precisely because of their mature experience, the elderly are able to offer young people precious advice and guidance. In view of all this, the signs of human frailty which are clearly connected with advanced age become a summons to the mutual dependence and indispensable solidarity which link the different generations, inasmuch as every person needs others and draws enrichment from the gifts and charisms of all” (n. 10).
- <sup>6</sup> The topic of migration and the need to help migrants is very important to Pope Francis, who addresses it frequently.

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