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Old Age in the Perspective of Faith: Elderly People in the Life of the Church

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Abstract: Elderly people make up an increasingly large part of society and the Church. The theme of old age is also increasingly present in papal teaching. This is evidenced, for example, by the series of Wednesday Catecheses on old age delivered by Pope Francis in 2022, or by the establishment of the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly. Given the importance of the presence of the elderly, this article aims to present old age in the perspective of faith, and the importance of the presence of the elderly in the life of the Church. The author will therefore focus, first and foremost, on the view of old age as a time of thanksgiving and gratitude to God for the gift of life, for the goods received, the experiences lived, and the people encountered. Viewed from the perspective of faith, old age is also a time of preparation for death and for meeting the Risen Christ. It is therefore a time to adopt a new outlook on faith and the call to holiness. Old age is, at the same time, a period of life in which individuals can still contribute a lot to the life of the family, society, and the Church through their commitment, service, bearing witness to the faith, bearing witness to the Gospel and the values that flow from living the Gospel, through works of charity and, above all, through sharing the awareness that life is a beautiful gift from God that is worth using well and wisely. And, through the wisdom gained over the many years of their lives, elderly people become authentic witnesses of God's love. The experience of long life and gratitude for this gift is not only relevant to Catholics and Christians, but has a universal appeal, since in any society, regardless of faith, human life should also be valued in old age.

Keywords: old age; faith; the Church; gift; thanksgiving (gratitude); family; grace; service



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1. Introduction

The declining number of children being born in Europe not only brings with it a demographic crisis but also means that elderly people are becoming an increasingly prominent group in society.

The consequence of this is not only the fact that the population is ageing, but also that there is a need to change social attitudes towards the elderly among young people, to preserve and emphasise the importance of the quality of life in society, the importance of intergenerational dialogue, the appreciation of the elderly as those who uphold history, culture, and the memory of the past on which the future is built, and to emphasise the importance of the family and spending the final years of one's life in the family (Brzeziński 2023). Attention should also be paid to the religious dimension of the lives of elderly people, their experience of faith and the impact that the faith of elderly people has and should have on the way they experience the "autumn of life". This is because faith and the ability to perceive every person as a fellow human being, whom we ought to help and treat with Christian love, is an element of life which, as it were, guards the personal dignity of all human beings, including the elderly. This was pointed out by Benedict XVI when he said: "faith is not only a cultural heritage, but a continuous action of the grace of God who calls human freedom which may or may not respond to His call" (Benedict XVI 2006b).

As Pope Francis observes, the increasing presence of elderly people in society leads to the danger that they may be rejected as a "burden" that hinders a carefree and hedonistic

way of life (Pope Francis 2022a). For this reason, he continues his diagnosis by emphasizing that “old age is one of the most urgent issues facing the human family at this time” (Pope Francis 2022a). This situation has given rise to the present study. Based on Pope Francis’ teaching contained in his catecheses on old age,¹ as well as in other statements, and drawing on the Church’s extensive teaching and literature on old age, this paper proposes to look at this period of life from the perspective of faith, the importance of elderly people’s faith in the “autumn of life”, and to point out the role they can and should have in the life of the Church community and what the Church as a community of faith can and should offer to elderly people.

Using the method of analysis and synthesis of source texts, the author will therefore seek to present the time of old age as a time of special grace and thanksgiving, a time of rediscovery of faith, also in the face of impending death, and a time of bearing special witness to faith. At the same time, of course, old age offers a space for those who still enjoy good health to use this time for service and involvement in the life of the Catholic Church, and for those whose health has declined to join with the sufferings of Christ, and to call on the graces needed by the Catholic Church and the people they love in their prayers. Therefore, outlining the significance of elderly people’s presence in the life of the Church will be an important part of this study. This is because the gift of faith received and experienced in the community of the Church opens a person up to “the alliance between generations, which restores all ages of life to the human, is our lost gift and we have to get it back. It must be found, in this throwaway culture and in this culture of productivity” (Pope Francis 2022a). Undoubtedly, faith makes it possible to experience the time of old age in a more fruitful way, not only by opening elderly people up to others, but also by helping them to commit themselves to and for the good of others, and helping them to be better prepared for meeting the Risen Christ and for passing away from this world. This is how the objective of this study is defined.

2. Old Age as a Time of Grace and Thanksgiving

Viewing old age from the perspective of faith, it seems that, first of all, it is necessary to see this period of life as a time of special grace and thanksgiving. It is a time to express gratitude to God for the years one has lived, for the people one has met, and for the experiences of life, both the pleasant and joyful ones and the unpleasant and sorrowful ones, because they all shape the human personality, character, and the fullness of the human being. It is a time to give thanks for the graces received and the watchful constant presence of God, even if it was not visible at certain times. Pope Francis notes, “As one grows older, one loses one’s sight to some extent, but one’s inner vision becomes more penetrating; one sees with the heart. Man in old age becomes capable of seeing things that previously escaped his attention. The elderly know how to look and how to see” (Pope Francis 2022c). And even when elderly people fail to see the good they have received, they should “thank the Lord for the benefits received” (Pope Francis 2015b), because all that we receive from the hands of God is a gift that is meant to serve man. Therefore, at the beginning of this reflection on old age from the perspective of faith, it is worth recalling what John Paul II wrote in his *Letter to the Elderly*. Let us also remark that the *Letter* was written when its author was himself experiencing the autumn of his life. He wrote: “Despite the limitations brought on by age, I continue to enjoy life. For this I thank the Lord. It is wonderful to be able to give oneself to the very end for the sake of the Kingdom of God!” (Pope John Paul II 1999, n. 17). These words confirm and reaffirm the conviction that people can and should be aware of the value and beauty of life at every stage of their development, including old age, when they have to live with the difficulties brought on by loss of strength, illness, or loneliness. Moreover, the Holy Father stresses that one should not only enjoy old age and be thankful for it but also bear witness to its beauty despite limitations and hardships. At every age, one has to discover God’s presence and blessings, and the abundance they bring (cf. Brzeziński 2018, p. 16). To be able to give thanks for life is to recognise that life is not just a collection of biochemical processes, but that it is a mystery, it is a unity of soul

and body, and it is a gift offered by God, the Creator and Giver of all life (cf. Lacroix 2020, pp. 43–44; Cañizares Llovera 2020, pp. 59–60, 69–70). Moreover, Francis emphasises that “the gratitude of the elderly for the gifts received from God during their lives restores the joy of living together to the community and gives the essential quality of purposefulness to the faith of the disciples” (Pope Francis 2022g). It is therefore an essential part of life lived for the purpose of understanding the essence of humanity and the meaning of human life. Thus, it can be seen that both John Paul II and Francis, having reached their old age, saw and emphasised the importance of giving special thanks for the years lived, the experiences, and the graces received. Moreover, one could say that old age is a special grace in itself, as not every person is given the opportunity to enjoy it. Therefore, one could say that old age is not only a time of gratitude but also “a symbol of gratitude” (Stefanek 2005, p. 247).

The perspective of faith in understanding the meaning of old age as a time of grace and thanksgiving also leads one to take a look at biblical sources and see how old age is treated in the Scripture. The first point to be noted is that, in the Bible, longevity and living to old age are a blessing, a grace, and a gift. If, on the one hand, old age confronts us with human frailty, interdependence, family and community ties, and, above all, our divine sonship, then, on the other hand, by granting us the gift of old age, God the Father gives us time to get to know Him better, to deepen our intimacy with Him, to penetrate more and more into His heart and to entrust ourselves to Him with the confidence of a child. Old age in the Bible is also portrayed as a time of renewed fruitfulness, with the elderly becoming instruments of salvation, as was the case, for example, in the lives of Abraham and Sarah or Zechariah and Elizabeth (cf. Pope Francis 2020; Przygoda 2022, pp. 411–12; Stefanek 2005, pp. 247–48). One can repeatedly see in the pages of the Scripture that God chooses “what is weak in the eyes of the world” (1 Cor 1:27) (and old age, as it were, embodies the weakness and frailty of human nature) in order to fulfil His plan of love towards man; namely, His plan of Salvation.

One can therefore say, following Francis’ thought, that “old age, in particular, is a time of grace in which the Lord will renew His call: He calls us to preserve and transmit the faith, calls us to pray, especially to intercede; calls us to be close to those who maybe in need” (Pope Francis 2014, 2019b). God calls the elderly to follow Him, giving them grace and strength, and, at the same time, entrusting them with the mission to bear witness to His love (Pope Francis 2015b). The wisdom of the long journey that accompanies old age to its end should be experienced as an offering, an ongoing finding of the meaning of life, and individuals should remain engaged as much as health and strength allow, instead of reducing this time to mere surviving until death. Therefore, it seems necessary for the elderly and the young alike to undertake every day the task of restoring due dignity to the life of the elderly and to treat it as a challenge of humanity that requires both human commitment and God’s help and grace (Pope Francis 2022a). “But experience teaches that daily difficulties, by God’s grace, often contribute to people’s growth and to the forging of their character” (Pope John Paul II 1999, n. 2). Elderly people, therefore, become a kind of “treasure which the younger generation should not be denied, especially when they bear witness to their faith at the approach of death” (Benedict XVI 2006a). So, too, the young should look with gratitude at the presence of the elderly in their lives and draw on this gift of grace to shape their humanity on the one hand and their Christian attitude towards their fellow human beings on the other.

3. A Time of Preparation for the Transition to Eternity

Old age also evokes the sense of the ultimate purpose of human existence. It is faith that allows a person to open themselves to eternity, to meet the Risen Christ, and to attain the fullness of the gift of His love, which is eternal life and full union with Him in the Kingdom of God. This was the outlook that John Paul II was pointing towards when he wrote in his *Letter to the Elderly*: “there is an urgent need to recover a correct perspective on life as a whole. The correct perspective is that of eternity, for which life at every phase is a meaningful preparation. Old age too has a proper role to play in this process of gradual

maturing along the path to eternity. If life is a pilgrimage towards our heavenly home, then old age is the most natural time to look towards the threshold of eternity" (Pope John Paul II 1999, n. 14). The ageing person is not approaching the end, but the mystery of eternity, and in order to understand it, they must draw closer to God and live in a relationship with Him. Caring for the spirituality of the elderly, their need to be close to Christ and to share their faith, is a task of love in the Church (Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). One can see here a clear indication both for the elderly, for the family, and for the community of the Church to be open to the workings of "the Holy Spirit, who resurrects in them the longing for the final encounter with Christ in the house of His Father and Our Father" (Benedict XVI 2006b). Being open to such working of the Holy Spirit undoubtedly makes it possible to look at death not with fear and apprehension, but with faith and hope that death is a passage to the better life promised by Christ.

This is also the way of seeing old age that Pope Francis develops in his teaching. He points out that faith is the element of a person's life that allows them to "see" the kingdom of God, helping them to be open to an accurate perception of the many signs of the approach of human hope for the fulfilment of what in human life bears the mark of being destined for God's eternity (Pope Francis 2022g). He emphasises that an elderly person moves forward, proceeds towards the goal of meeting God, and that this journey results from the wisdom of lived experience. Old age is therefore a special time of opening up to the tenderness and love of God (Pope Francis 2022g; cf. Kućko 2022, pp. 397–98), a time of opening up and preparing to meet the loving Father consciously and wisely. In this spiritual horizon, old age must also be understood as a time of entrusting oneself to God, when the body is becoming weaker; when mental vitality, memory, and the mind are declining; and when a person is becoming increasingly dependent on God. Also, for those who were previously lost on the path of life, and were very far from God and the Church, old age provides an opportunity to re-establish a relationship with God. Even when one no longer receives any human support and help, faith becomes a fundamental virtue to be experienced not only as a commitment to revealed truths but, above all, as the certainty of God's love, which does not abandon or leave its creature alone (Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). Although death is certainly a difficult transition in the life of every human being, all people must prepare for this encounter, because everyone will experience it. Death is that moment in a person's life that ends a time of uncertainty and opens the person up to the more beautiful part of life, which is life with God (Pope Francis 2022j). It is faith that "illuminates the mystery of death and brings serenity to old age, now no longer lived passively as the expectation of a calamity, but rather as a promise-filled approach to the goal of full maturity. These are years to be lived with a sense of trusting abandonment into the hands of God, our provident and merciful Father. It is a time to be used creatively for deepening our spiritual life through more fervent prayer and commitment to the service of our brothers and sisters in charity" (Pope John Paul II 1999, n. 16). In this way, "elderly people become witnesses to the discarding of selfish attitudes; they also point to the need for gratitude in life" (Brzeziński 2018, p. 21).

For believers, old age should also become a time of prayerful thanksgiving for the goods and graces received, and, simultaneously, a time of conscious preparation for the encounter with the Risen Christ. Therefore, one can and should view this period of life as a special grace that only some people receive to prepare for death. For Pope Francis, believers' experiences of old age should be a time of joyful witness to this expectation. This is because, in old age especially, works of faith bring one closer to the Kingdom of God, since they are already beyond the power of the energies, words, and impulses of youth and maturity. For this very reason, they make the promise of life's true destiny even clearer; and the goal of man's life and the promise given by God is a place at the table with God in His Kingdom (Pope Francis 2022i). Christ died and rose again, and lives in the Trinitarian intimacy of God. He promised His disciples and friends: "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3). Christ has gone to prepare a place for everyone because he died and rose again to

save every person. Therefore, he comes to look for people and bring them to the feast in heaven. In this sense, death is a step towards the encounter with Jesus, who has prepared a place for everyone at the feast in heaven (Pope Francis 2022k). Pope Francis also highlights the fact that when Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God, he describes it as a wedding, as a feast with friends, as a place that makes the home perfect. Accepting in faith Jesus' words about the Kingdom allows human sensibility to rejoice in God's love (Pope Francis 2022k) and to look forward with hope, not so much to death, but to meeting Christ at the banquet in heaven. "Moreover, faith opens us to a 'hope that does not disappoint' (cf. Rom 5:5), placing us before the perspective of the final resurrection" (Pope John Paul II 1999, n. 2).

4. A Time of Rediscovery of Faith, of the Call to Holiness, and of Bearing Witness

The time of old age is undoubtedly a time when elderly people can and should take a new look at the experience of faith, the way they have been fulfilling their call to holiness and the way they should live to fulfil this call. This is, as it were, a consequence of approaching the end of their lives. The experience of faith and the understanding of the call to holiness are now more mature because they are enriched by the wisdom of life experiences and the years lived. Old age, therefore, also becomes a special period of life, in which the elderly can demonstrate to their faith to younger generations, share how they experienced their relationship with God, and how faith has influenced their attitudes to life. What this means for the elderly, in light of what Francis has said to them, is that they should also take care of themselves in their old age and learn to experience their old age actively, also in the spiritual sense, nurturing their inner life through diligent reading of the word of God, daily prayer, regular participation in the sacraments, and participation in the liturgy. While taking care to develop their relationship with God, they should also foster relationships with their family, children, and grandchildren, to whom they owe their caring affection. It is a time to nurture relationships with the poor and suffering, who also expect closeness expressed through concrete help and prayer (Pope Francis 2022h). The need for the elderly to care for the development of their spiritual life also stems from the fact that the weakening of faith and religious practice in some societies is already having a very strong impact not only on the elderly themselves but also on entire families, making them more alone in the face of difficulties. Therefore, the religious and spiritual life of the elderly and their families should be reinvigorated, so that the elderly do not feel lonely, and that families caring for elderly people do not feel isolated and abandoned. A deeper relationship with God will naturally strengthen interpersonal relationships (Pope Francis 2016, n. 43).

Prayer is one of the elements on which the building of a relationship with God and the experience of faith is based. As Francis emphasises, prayer, on the one hand, expresses closeness to God and, on the other hand, gives strength, even to those who are most fragile and weak, and thus also to those who are at the end of their lives, to persevere on the path of faith, memory, dreams, and prayer (Pope Francis 2021b). "Prayer renews in the elder's heart the promise of God's faithfulness and his blessing. The elderly man rediscovers prayer and bears witness to its strength. In the Gospels, Jesus never rejects the prayer of those who are in need of help. By virtue of their weakness, the elderly can teach those who are living in other ages of life that we all need to abandon ourselves to the Lord, to invoke his help" (Pope Francis 2022f). God is the loving Father who hears every prayer. This is the case even when prayer is a manifestation of rebellion and misunderstanding, as was the case with Job. It is worth emphasising this aspect of prayer, namely, man's conversation with God pointed out, for example, by Francis when he writes, recalling Job's prayer: "If you have some wound in your heart, some pain, and you want to object, object even to God. God will listen to you. God is a Father. God is not afraid of our prayer of protest, no! God understands. But be free, be free in your prayer. Don't imprison your prayer within preconceived paradigms. This is what prayer must be like; spontaneous, like the prayer of a son to his father, telling him everything that comes to his lips, knowing that his father understands him" (Pope Francis 2022e; Cf. Kućko 2022, pp. 394–95). The awareness of being understood and heard by God in this way is all the more important in the lives of

the elderly, because the time of the “autumn of life” they experience is often, as in the case of Job, associated with physical, spiritual, and moral suffering, and with an inability to understand this experience. It can therefore express itself in rebellion, but this rebellion is always heard by God.

The lived faith of elderly people also allows them to adopt a new perspective on the call to holiness. It helps them look at the call to holiness in a new, more mature way and to experience it more consciously. Every person is called to holiness. And to be a saint is, as Francis teaches, above all, to carry out one’s work in the service of one’s brothers with honesty and skill. To be a saint is to follow Christ patiently and to teach one’s children and grandchildren to imitate Christ this way. To be a saint is to care for the common good by giving up one’s selfishness (Pope Francis 2018, n. 14). To be a saint is to experience one’s weakness, troubles, and the frailty of old age patiently, in union with the sufferings of Christ (Pope Francis 2018, n. 101).

The awareness of having fulfilled the call to holiness also opens one up to giving witness to faith. For Francis, old age is inseparably bound to giving witness to faith. As he emphasises in one of his catecheses, old age is a special time of bearing witness. Elderly people can demonstrate to the younger generations that each life is a gift and a blessing, that God is man’s Creator and the Giver of all life, and that developing one’s humanity, that is, the image and likeness of God that one bears within oneself, is worth striving for (cf. Pope Francis 2022i). The need for bearing such witness arises, in principle, from the simple fact that faith is based on the witness of others. This includes parents, grandparents, and all those who, by leading a holy life, amid their downfalls and imperfections, demonstrate that believing in God, accepting His teachings, and following them until one reaches the goal of eternal life, is worthwhile (Pope Francis 2018, n. 3). Faith means the realisation, as in the case of Job, that “God the Redeemer lives and that he will see God (cf. Job 19:25–27). It is a simple faith in God’s resurrection, a simple faith in Jesus Christ, a simple faith that the Lord is always waiting for us and will come to us” (Pope Francis 2022e). For this simple faith “Job is praised because he understood the mystery of God’s tenderness hidden behind His silence” (Pope Francis 2022e). Also today, the believer “can say, like Job: ‘I knew you because I had heard about you, but now I have seen you because I have encountered you (Job 42:5). This testimony is particularly believable if it is picked up in old age, in its progressive frailty and loss” (Pope Francis 2022f). Elderly people have seen and experienced a lot in life, and can therefore bear witness to God’s faithfulness. They have witnessed that God always fulfils the promises He has made to man. The witness of elderly people is credible to children; young people and adults are not able to make it as authentic, as tender and as poignant, as older people, or grandparents, can. When an elderly person blesses the life that comes their way, putting aside any resentment of the life that is passing away, the effect is irresistible. The person does not become embittered with the passing of time and their own life. Instead, they have the joy of good wine, wine that has become good over the years. The witness of elderly people connects the stages of life and the dimensions of time, past, present, and future, because they are not only a memory; they are the present, and they are also a promise (Pope Francis 2022i).

Describing the time of old age and the need for elderly people to bear witness, Francis also recalls Jesus’ conversation with Peter (cf. John 21:15–22) concerning the passage of time as an example, pointing to two specific elements of this conversation. The first concerns bearing witness and the second concerns life. For Francis, the two are very closely connected. If, with the passage of time, with the passing of the years, one ceases to be self-sufficient and is increasingly dependent on others, if old age is inevitably linked to a loss of strength, to illness, to suffering, to the passing of the time when one used to be master of oneself and one’s own life, then, at the same time, there arises a need for help from others, which often becomes a necessity. There arises, therefore, the need to accept one’s weakness. This weakness should be filled with bearing witness. Bearing witness to faith and the love of Christ is important because one must be a witness to Jesus even in weakness, sickness, and death. One is a disciple of Christ both in life and in death

(Pope Francis 2022j). Despite Peter's weakness and frailty, Jesus invites Peter and each of His disciples to follow Him, "You must follow Me" (John 21:22), regardless of age or health. Moreover, one must follow Christ also under the limiting conditions of weakness and old age. The authenticity of one's witness, the consistency of one's life with the professed faith, is expressed in human weakness. In fact, it can be said that it is precisely human weaknesses caused by age, illness, and reliance on others that constitute faith and closeness to Jesus and can contribute to their growth (Pope Francis 2022j). It is a special time of union with the suffering and crucified Christ (Pope Francis 2022f).

The testimony of faith from the elderly takes on particular importance in family life, which consequently also translates into the life of the Church, since, as John Paul II emphasised, it is owing to this testimony that in many families grandchildren are "taught the rudiments of the faith by their grandparents" (Pope John Paul II 1999, n. 13; López Trujillo 2020, p. 23). Especially in the families where parents have no time for their children, the role of grandparents in the transmission of faith is irreplaceable (cf. Brzeziński 2013, pp. 32–33). The transmission of faith consists, first and foremost, of speaking about one's personal experience of faith. It is the recounting of events from the life histories of specific individuals and specific families that should be transformed into testimony. To be authentic and honest, the testimony must be faithful, which means that the story must be told exactly as it was experienced by those involved. Only they can tell it well, truthfully, and honestly (cf. Pope Francis 2022c).

It is also worth paying attention to another aspect of the testimony of faith handed down in the family, which was pointed out by Francis, namely, language. According to the Pope, it is of considerable importance, since "faith is passed on in dialect, that is, in familiar speech, between grandparents and grandchildren, between parents and their children. The faith is always handed on in dialect, in that familiar dialect and experience of the years. This is the reason dialogue in a family is so important, the dialogue of children with their grandparents, who are the ones who have the wisdom of the faith" (Pope Francis 2022c; cf. Cañizares Llovera 2020, pp. 67–68; Kućko 2022, p. 392). Sharing their testimony with the young, grandfathers and grandmothers, and all the elders, transmit the story of faith in a language that is close and understandable to them, and that passes from the elderly to the young (Pope Francis 2022c). It is a language of the love of family life, a language that expresses respect for every person and their experiences, a language that respects the diversity of experiences, and that is based on truth.

Elderly people's testimony of faith is inseparably linked to the testimony of the hierarchy of values they have adopted. This is emphasised by Francis when he says that in a world such as the existing one, where strength and appearance are often mythologised, elderly people have a mission to bear witness to values that truly matter and that are everlasting because they are inscribed in the heart of every person and guaranteed by the Word of God. This means, above all, bearing witness to the value and culture of life. Bearing witness to the fact that every stage of human existence is a gift from God and has its beauty and meaning, even if it is marked by fragility (Francesco 2016).

By doing so, one is bearing witness to respect for life stemming from the long experience of living and the years lived (Pope Francis 2022c). Bearing witness to history, the history of life, the family, and the people of the Church (Pope Francis 2022c). According to Francis, such testimony is essential in today's world. It is a testimony that can recognise God's signs, His presence, and action. It is a testimony that recognises the Sign of God, which is Jesus. It is a testimony that helps one overcome the illusion of eternal youth in favour of the ability to look at the transience and fragility of life (Pope Francis 2022d). Finally, it is a testimony of sensitivity. This includes sensitivity to spiritual values and sensitivity to other people and their needs. The testimony of sensitivity is important to Francis because only an "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 to get her with the departure of one's own [. . .]. The spiritual sensitivity of old age is capable of breaking down competition and conflict be-

tween generations in a credible and definitive way. With this sensitivity, elderly people transcend conflict, move beyond it, and approach unity rather than 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!" (Pope Francis 2022d).

5. A Time of Service and Engagement in the Life of the Church

The time of old age is a time of active presence of the elderly in the life of the family, society, and the Church. It is worth noting and emphasising that, in their writings on the Church's teaching on old age, recent popes, as well as other Church institutions, stress that the "autumn of life" is not and cannot be a time when a person is put on the "sidelines" of life. Neither should elderly people remove themselves from life's activities and service to their families, to their local communities and, in particular, to the community of the Church in which they live, which is the parish community. In particular, those whose health and powers allow them to do so should be committed to serving their neighbours and being actively present in the life of the Church. Aware of this irreplaceable role of the elderly, the Church becomes a place where generations are called to share God's plan of love with others, in a relationship of mutual exchange of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This intergenerational sharing compels one to change one's view of elderly people so as to learn to look forward to the future with them. Elderly people too, especially in the Church, can and should write new pages of holiness, service, and prayer, as they are the present and future of the Church (Pope Francis 2020). Even in old age, serving the community is possible and worthwhile. It is good for elderly people to keep cultivating their responsibility for service, overcoming the temptation to quit and remove themselves from engagements that benefit the community. After all, they are and should be treated as an important part of the community to which they can still render a service of gratitude to God and people (cf. Pope Francis 2022i). Old age needs to be viewed as a form of efficient and wisdom-endowed ministry (Stefanek 2005, p. 245). Elderly people are an extremely precious gift to the Church. As John Paul II emphasised, "The Church still needs you. She appreciates the services which you may wish to provide in many areas of the apostolate; she counts on the support of your longer periods of prayer; she counts on your advice born of experience, and she is enriched by your daily witness to the Gospel" (Pope John Paul II 1999, n. 13; Cf. Brzeziński 2018, pp. 25–26).

In his message for the First World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly, Francis pointed out that the vocation of older persons is "to preserve our roots, to pass on the faith to the young and to care for the little ones" (Pope Francis 2021b). The elderly are witnesses to the roots of tradition and therefore witnesses to the truth and at the same time servants of the truth (Stefanek 2005, p. 246). It is significant that an increasing number of elderly people understand this need of the Church and make generous use of the time and talents with which God has endowed them, opening themselves up to helping and supporting their neighbours. One can point to such areas of elderly people's activity in the parish as caring for the maintenance of the Church buildings, involvement in catechesis, animating the liturgy, contributing to charity, transmitting and being guardians of the spiritual and cultural values of the Church community (cf. Francesco 2016). It is necessary for the community of the Church to be, in an increasingly fast-paced world, in a world of a "culture of temporality", of utilitarianism and hedonism, a witness to the Christian's capacity and ability to stop, like our Master Christ, by the side of every human being, especially of those in need. There is a need for the Church to demonstrate that "God does not entrust His talents only to the young and strong, but has talents for everyone, in proportion to the capacity of everyone, even the old. The Church community must know how to make use of the talents and charismata of so many elderly people, which are a wealth to be harnessed in the community's life. This requires creative attention, new attention, and generous availability from the elderly people. Although their former skills of active life have been lost, they can still teach, advise, catechise, witness, care, nurture,

and listen, despite the limitations of their age” (Pope Francis 2022e). “In the tradition of the Church there is a wealth of wisdom that has always supported a culture of closeness to the elderly, a disposition of warm and supportive companionship in this final phase of life” (Pope Francis 2015a). Old age is a time of witness to such essential values in life as truth, love, beauty, and justice, without which life becomes a delusion and an obsession to enjoy life without knowing its true beauty and depth (Pope Francis 2022b). “The testimony of the elderly in fidelity is important” (Pope Francis 2015b). It is the witness of “faithfulness until death, overcoming selfishness, and the perception of life, which are the most important in a culture of temporality, autonomy, and desire for power” (Lacroix 2020, p. 39). The time of old age is a time of bearing witness to the beauty of life built on a foundation of values and faith in God’s Word. For Francis, there is no retirement age when it comes to preaching the Gospel and passing tradition on to one’s grandchildren. In the community of the Church, all are responsible for proclaiming the Gospel (Pope Francis 2021b; Cf. Blázquez Pérez 2020, pp. 89–90; Przygoda 2022, pp. 412–13). Since “the family and the Church are inseparable in carrying out the fundamental task of proclaiming the Gospel” (Blázquez Pérez 2020, p. 96), elderly people too, being part of both the family and the Church, are invited to proclaim the Gospel in the communities in which they live. And for this reason, notes Francis, “the Holy Spirit continues to stir up in elderly people today the thoughts and words of wisdom that are very precious because they praise the glory of God and guard the roots of nations. They remind us that old age is a gift and that grandparents are the link between generations that transmits the experience of life and faith to the young” (Pope Francis 2015c, 2021a).

Prayer is, of course, an irreplaceable gift that elderly people can and should offer in the service of the Church. “The family, which is the smallest Church, is the proper place for prayer, for the transmission of faith and education, for living a life of true love, and for radiating faith and witnessing to it to the outside world” (Cañizares Llovera 2020, p. 67; Przygoda 2022, p. 412). The prayer of the elderly can help more than other efforts made by numerous people. It is a very precious gift; it is a lung which the Church and the world cannot do without (cf. Pope Francis 2013c, n. 262). The prayerful intercession of the elderly for the world and the Church shows everyone with calm confidence that together we can and will reach the shore, the goal of human life, which is the encounter with the Risen Christ (Pope Francis 2021b; Pope Francis 2015c; Cf. Przygoda 2022, p. 415). Prayer constantly purifies the heart and prevents it from hardening under the influence of egotism. This is why prayer becomes the special mission of grandparents and the vocation of elderly people (Pope Francis 2015b). For Francis, elderly people’s prayer becomes not only a gift to the Church and its wealth but also an inspirational wisdom for the entire human community, especially those who are too busy, too preoccupied, and too distracted (Pope Francis 2015b). When the young do not have time for God and other human beings, the elderly, who pray for them, “are able to intercede for the expectations of younger generations and give dignity to the memory and sacrifices of past generations. We are able to remind ambitious young people that a life without love is a barren life. We are able to say to young people who are afraid that anxiety about the future can be overcome. We are able to teach the young who are overly self-absorbed that there is more joy in giving than in receiving. Grandfathers and grandmothers form the enduring ‘chorus’ of a great spiritual sanctuary, where prayers of supplication and songs of praise sustain the community which toils and struggles in the field of life” (Pope Francis 2015b). And, as the long-time Cardinal Trujillo says, “prayer should sustain the continuous renewal of families as an institution for the transmission of the faith” (López Trujillo 2020, p. 27).

What needs to be emphasised is that the presence of elderly people at the centre of Church life is a great asset and value. It is sufficient to think of the decisive role that elderly people have played in preserving the faith and in passing on the faith to young people in countries under atheistic and authoritarian governments. And one can also think of what so many grandparents are still doing to pass on the faith to their grandchildren. “In secularized societies in many countries,” Pope Francis notes, “parents do not have, for the most part, the Christian formation and living faith that the grandparents have which

they can pass on to their grandchildren. They are the indispensable link in educating children and young people in the faith. We must get used to including them in our pastoral horizons and to considering them, in a non-episodic way, as one of the vital components of our communities. They are not only people whom we are called to safeguard. They can be the protagonists of a pastoral evangelizing ministry, privileged witnesses of God's faithful love" (Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). It is therefore worthwhile for the Church to constantly keep it in mind that the Christian community can benefit greatly from the presence of the elderly, especially in the sphere of evangelisation. As John Paul II noted, in numerous families, grandchildren have learned the fundamentals of faith thanks to their grandparents. But, as he stresses, elderly people can make a beneficial contribution in many other areas too. "The Spirit acts as and where he wills, and quite frequently he employs human means which seem of little account in the eyes of the world. How many people find understanding and comfort from elderly people who may be lonely or ill and yet are able to instil courage by their loving advice, their silent prayers, or their witness of suffering borne with patient acceptance! At the very time when their physical energies and their level of activity are decreasing, these brothers and sisters of ours become all the more precious in the mysterious plan of Providence." (Pope John Paul II 1999, n. 13; cf. Brzeziński 2012, pp. 263–64). "The proclamation of the Gospel will be a basis for restoring the dignity of human life in these contexts, for Jesus desires to pour out an abundance of life upon our cities (cf. Jn 10:10). The unified and complete sense of human life that the Gospel proposes is the best remedy for the ills of our cities, even though we have to realize that a uniform and rigid program of evangelization is not suited to this complex reality. But to live our human life to the fullest and to meet every challenge as a leaven of Gospel witness in every culture and in every city will make us better Christians and bear fruit in our cities" (Pope Francis 2013c, n. 75). The "good news" of the family is a very important part of evangelisation, which Christians can communicate to all by bearing witness through their lives. Truly Christian families are distinguished by faithfulness, patience, openness to life, and respect for the elderly. The secret of all this is the presence of Jesus in the family. It is therefore necessary to offer support to all those who, with respect and courage, bear witness to the beauty of marriage and family enlightened by the Gospel. One must be close to all in proclaiming this Gospel of the family, this beauty of the family (Pope Francis 2013b).

According to Francis, elderly people have a special vocation received from God. It is a vocation to evangelise, a vocation to foster a culture of encounter and dialogue, especially intergenerational dialogue. As he observes, in many circles where a culture of exclusion, a "throwaway culture", has become widespread, where there is no place for either the old person or the unwanted child, where there is no time to stop on the road with the poor person and the elderly, especially in the Church, where everyone is a brother or sister in Christ, there is room for encounter, there is openness to all, and there is solidarity with the elderly (Pope Francis 2013a). So the need that arises today is to acknowledge our culture with realism and love, and imbue it with the Gospel. It is the need to fulfil, especially by elderly people, the call to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to the new times. It is the need to love the realities in which we live with their opportunities and threats, with their joys and sorrows, with their wealth and limitations, and with their successes and mistakes, and to love the present time and fill it with the Gospel (Pope Francis 2019a, n. 200; Cf. Kućko 2022, p. 390). Therefore, the authentic testimony of the elderly is needed to protect people from the tragedy of losing the truth about man and the family, from the total secularisation that distorts this truth and leads to the disintegration of the human person (López Trujillo 2020, p. 26). For this to happen, it is necessary, according to Francis, to go out to meet reality and time with a smile on one's face and the Gospel in one's hands. It is necessary to go out into the streets of our parishes to look for the elderly who live alone. This is because old age is not a disease but a privilege. Loneliness can be a disease, but it can be cured with charity, closeness, and spiritual consolation (Pope Francis 2020). In this sense, the Church can become "a place where generations are called to share in God's plan of love, in a relationship of the mutual exchange of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This

intergenerational sharing obliges us to consider older people differently, to learn to look to the future together with them. [...]The Lord can and wants to write with them also new pages, pages of holiness, of service, of prayer” (Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). It follows that the Church, both as the wider community of Christ’s disciples and as the domestic Church, the family, is obliged to teach children to care for their grandparents and to recognise the necessity of meeting them, the necessity of devoting time to them, and the necessity of visiting them. This is because the dialogue between young people and grandparents, children and grandparents, is fundamental for society and the Church, as well as for the family. It is also fundamental for health and life. Where there is no dialogue between the young and the old, something is missing and a generation grows up without a past, that is, without roots (Pope Francis 2022i; Kućko 2022, pp. 390–92). One Gospel account in particular highlights the value and surprising potential of old age. It is the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, an event that the Eastern Christian tradition calls the “Feast of Meeting of the Lord”. On this occasion, two elderly people, Simeon and Anna, meet the Baby Jesus; these two frail old people present Him to the world as the light of the people and speak of Him to those who were waiting for the fulfilment of God’s promises (cf. Luke 2:32, 38). Simeon takes Jesus in his arms; the Child and the elderly couple, as if symbolising the beginning and the end of earthly existence, support each other, in fact, as some liturgical hymns proclaim, “the old man carried the Child, but the Child supported the elderly man”. In this way, hope is born from the meeting of two fragile people, a child and an elderly person, to remind one, in these times that promote a culture of activity and strength, that the Lord likes to reveal greatness in smallness and strength in tenderness. This episode, as the Holy Father has repeatedly emphasised, is also an encounter between the young people, represented by Mary and Joseph, who carry the Child to the temple, and the elders Simeon and Anna, who receive and instruct them. At the encounter, however, the roles are reversed; the biblical text, through multiple repetitions, shows how the young people try to faithfully adhere to tradition, following what the “Law of the Lord” has prescribed (cf. Luke 2:22–24, 27), while the elderly reveal the novelty of the Spirit (cf. Luke 2:25–27), foretelling the future (Pontifical Academy for Life 2021).

6. Conclusions

To conclude the presented analysis on the subject of old age from the perspective of faith and in the life of the Church in the teaching of the Church, and especially that of Francis, it should be emphasised once again that “the Church looks upon the elderly with love, gratitude, and great respect. After all, the elderly constitute an essential part of the Christian community. They are, in the main, the guardians of the roots and memory of the people. Their experience is a precious treasure, essential for looking to the future with hope and responsibility, and their maturity and wisdom accumulated over the years can help the youngest, supporting them on the path of development and openness to the future, in search of their own path. In fact, the elderly testify that, even in the hardest trials, trust in God and a better future must never be lost. They are like trees that continue to bear fruit; even under the weight of years, they can make their original contribution to a society rich in values and in the affirmation of a culture of life” (Francesco 2016). It is therefore the task of the Church community to care for the elderly, to ensure that they too are an integral part of the community and that they feel this way (Pope Francis 2022i). The elderly, on the other hand, should become involved in the life of the Church as much as their strength allows and bear witness to the faith, witnessing that only a life in union with Christ and in His Church is truly meaningful. They are, after all, witnesses to the formation of their own humanity and can thus be witnesses and teachers of a way of life that is peaceful and sensitive to the weakest (cf. Pope Francis 2022k). Elderly people are an extremely precious gift to the family and the Church and can serve to foster a culture of intergenerational dialogue, being authentic witnesses and transmitters of the Gospel and the value of life. Today, we need to believe and understand that “there is no stronger community than the community of the Eucharist. And when we participate in the community of the Church,

our bond of love gets deeper and expands. It gets deeper and draws strength and energy from the source of *agape*, the love of the Father, and it grows wider, opening up to a more extensive community” (Lacroix 2020, p. 46), to the community of the entire universal Church, where everyone feels, and is, needed and loved, where everyone can contribute at least a little, even in their weakness, to the community of the Church, which is supposed to grow.

It is also worth noting in closing that although Pope Francis addresses his teaching to believers in Christ, members of the Catholic Church, his teaching has the same value in the lives of all Christians. What is more, we can point to the universal nature of his teaching on old age, which are therefore applicable to all communities and every person for at least two reasons. First, by nature, in principle, every person is a believer. Although in the world we have different religions and different churches, almost every person is searching for God, searching for the truth about themselves and God, and searching for the answer to the question of what happens after death. This search is carried out with a greater or lesser awareness that only God can help in obtaining such an answer. Of course, the fullness of the truth of the answers to these questions is obtained in the encounter with Christ, but as we know, there are various ways of knowing the truth that lead to the encounter with God and His Son Jesus Christ, if only by learning about the natural law, which commands individuals to protect and care for each human life with respect for its human dignity. And here we enter the space of the second reason why Francis’ teaching on old age is relevant not only for Catholics but for all people, every human being and every human community. The reason is the personal dignity of every human being and the equal value of every human life. Historically, after all, in virtually all cultures and societies, human life and its dignity were protected. Today, unfortunately, this approach to the value of human life and its dignity is changing. This is due to the increasingly widespread culture of hedonism and utilitarianism, or as Pope Francis puts it—a culture of temporariness. Therefore, it is worthwhile today to remember and emphasize the importance and value of human life also in old age, and to help the elderly live with dignity in this period of their lives, which is undoubtedly full of new challenges. After all, the first and fundamental vocation of every human being is to be a person to the measure of the gift that is humanity itself (Pope John Paul II 1994, n. 9), and humanity is a gift that does not depend on the professed faith, the number of years, or the state of health, which should be respected and addressed always with due dignity.

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¹ The cycle of 18 catecheses on old age was delivered by Pope Francis between 23 February 2022 and 24 August 2022.

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