



The Holy See

HOLY MASS FOR THE ELDERLY

HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS

Saint Peter's Square

Sunday, 28 September 2014

Today we accept the Gospel we have just heard as a Gospel of encounter: the encounter between young and old, an encounter full of joy, full of faith, and full of hope.

Mary is young, very young. Elizabeth is elderly, yet God's mercy was manifested in her and for six months now, with her husband Zechariah, she has been expecting a child.

Here too, Mary shows us the way: she set out to visit her elderly kinswoman, to stay with her, to help her, of course, but also and above all to learn from her – an elderly person – a wisdom of life.

Today's first reading echoes in various ways the Fourth Commandment: "Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex 20:12). A people has no future without such an encounter between generations, without children being able to accept with gratitude the witness of life from the hands of their parents. And part of this gratitude for those who gave you life is also gratitude for our heavenly Father.

There are times when generations of young people, for complex historical and cultural reasons, feel a deeper need to be independent from their parents, "breaking free", as it were, from the legacy of the older generation. It is a kind of adolescent rebellion. But unless the encounter, the meeting of generations, is reestablished, unless a new and fruitful intergenerational equilibrium is restored, what results is a serious impoverishment for everyone, and the freedom which prevails in society is actually a false freedom, which almost always becomes a form of authoritarianism.

We hear the same message in the Apostle Paul's exhortation to Timothy and, through him, to the

Christian community. Jesus did not abolish the law of the family and the passing of generations, but brought it to fulfillment. The Lord formed a new family, in which bonds of kinship are less important than our relationship with him and our doing the will of God the Father. Yet the love of Jesus and the Father completes and fulfils our love of parents, brothers and sisters, and grandparents; it renews family relationships with the lymph of the Gospel and of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Saint Paul urges Timothy, who was a pastor and hence a father to the community, to show respect for the elderly and members of families. He tells him to do so like a son: treating “older men as fathers”, “older women as mothers” and “younger women as sisters” (cf. *1 Tim* 5:1). The head of the community is not exempt from following the will of God in this way; indeed, the love of Christ impels him to do so with an even greater love. Like the Virgin Mary, who, though she became the mother of the Messiah, felt herself driven by the love of God taking flesh within her to hasten to her elderly relative.

And so we return to this “icon” full of joy and hope, full of faith and charity. We can imagine that the Virgin Mary, visiting the home of Elizabeth, would have heard her and her husband Zechariah praying in the words of today’s responsorial psalm: “You, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth... Do not cast me off in the time of old age, do not forsake me when my strength is spent... Even to old age and grey hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come” (*Ps* 71:5,9,18). The young Mary listened, and she kept all these things in her heart. The wisdom of Elizabeth and Zechariah enriched her young spirit. They were no experts in parenthood; for them too it was the first pregnancy. But they were experts in faith, experts in God, experts in the hope that comes from him: and this is what the world needs in every age. Mary was able to listen to those elderly and amazed parents; she treasured their wisdom, and it proved precious for her in her journey as a woman, as a wife and as a mother.

The Virgin Mary likewise shows us the way: the way of encounter between the young and the elderly. The future of a people necessarily supposes this encounter: the young give the strength which enable a people to move forward, while the elderly consolidate this strength by their memory and their traditional wisdom.