

‘Old Age: Our Future’
**VATICAN CALLS
FOR NEW VISION IN CARING
FOR THE ELDERLY**

Pope Francis, in his encyclical “Fratelli Tutti,” said of COVID-19 deaths among older adults, “they did not have to die that way,” pointing out that, “older people found themselves cruelly abandoned.”¹



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The experience of older adults during the pandemic and what has been learned over the past year are also discussed in “Old Age: Our Future — The Elderly After the Pandemic.”² Old age, says the paper, is not a disease, but a blessing: “Being elderly is a gift from God and a huge resource, an achievement to be safeguarded with care, even in case of disabling illnesses. ... And it is undeniable that

the pandemic has given strength to our awareness that the ‘wealth of years’ is a treasure to be valued and protected.”

The plight of older people during the pandemic was terrible. Not only were the rates of disease and death higher than any other population, but lockdowns in nursing homes and other facilities led to loneliness and isolation, further worsening health. The document points out that older people living in families seemed more protected.

A NEW VISION

The demographics of aging, according to the paper, show a need for serious reflection. While expanded life expectancy has been a great achievement of science and medicine, society has not adapted. “What we need is new vision, a new paradigm that helps society as a whole to care for the elderly.”

Central to the new vision laid out in the document is keeping older people at home, saying, “Every effort must be made to enable the elderly to live in a ‘family’ environment during this phase of life.” It also details a “duty to create the best

conditions for the elderly to live this particular stage of life where they have been for a lifetime, at home with one’s family if possible and with life-long friends.”

In this vision, homes may need to be adapted to the needs of the elderly, such as removing architectural barriers. Services delivered in the home will be important, as will new technologies and advances in telemedicine and artificial intelligence that may let elderly persons stay in their homes or those of their families.

For elders to live at home, families will need support because caring for loved ones takes energy and money. “A wider network of solidarity must be reinvented, not necessarily and exclusively based on blood ties, but on affiliations, friendships, common feeling and mutual generosity,” the document explains.

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their principal goal the personalization of social and health and welfare initiatives,” the document advocates, adding that “independent living, assisted living, co-housing and all those initiatives inspired by the value proposition of mutual assistance must be promoted with creativity and intelligence while still making possible for the elderly a life that is autonomous and independent.”

VALUE ELDERS

Despite frailty, the elderly play a role in the preservation and transmission of the faith and in understanding life as a whole. “If life is a pilgrimage to the mystery of God, old age is the time when most naturally one looks to the threshold of this mystery.”

The paper specifically urges the young to get to know the old. Pope Francis has frequently told young people to stay close to their grandparents, saying in an address on July 26, 2020, “Dear young people, each of these elders is your grandfather! Do not leave them alone! Use the imagination of love, make phone calls, video calls, send messages, listen to them Send them a hug.”³

“Old Age: Our Future” builds on the benefits of uniting the young and old, saying, “If the two generations can manage to meet, they can bring into the body of society that new sap of humanism that would make society more supportive.” It also invites dioceses, parishes and all ecclesial communities to reflect more attentively on the great world of the elderly, “Taking care of the spirituality of the elderly, of their need for intimacy with Christ and sharing of faith is a task of charity in the Church.”

NOT UTOPIAN

The paper concludes by saying that the vision it describes is not an abstract utopian pretense. Instead, it can “bring to life and nourish new and wiser public health policies and original proposals for a welfare system for the elderly. More effective, as well as more human. This requires an ethic of the public good and the principle of respect for the dignity of every individual, without distinction, not even that of age.”

CHA, Catholic Charities USA and the Community of Sant’Egidio — a lay Catholic association dedicated to social service — teamed up to pro-

Some themes and lessons from the Vatican document “Old Age: Our Future”

- The pandemic gives us the occasion to learn from past mistakes and plan for the future.
- Elderly in nursing homes fared very poorly — up to half the European deaths were in nursing homes.
- Old age should not be seen as a disease, but as a blessing.
- Learning to honor older people is necessary for our future.
- The role of caregivers should be given greater importance.
- Young people and older people can help and learn from each other.
- All spheres of society can play a role (culture, schools, volunteering, entertainment, manufacturing) in helping the elderly live at home.

mote “Old Age: Our Future” and its recommendations in a series of four webinars that included a description of the document, the implications of the pandemic on older adults, models for quality care and implications for the future. The archived webinar series, along with the Vatican document and other information, is at www.chausa.org/eldercare/old-age---our-future.

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NOTES

1. Pope Francis, “Fratelli Tutti” (Rome: Vatican, 2020), 19.
2. “Old Age: Our Future — The Elderly After the Pandemic,” Pontifical Academy for Life and the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, February 9, 2021, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_academies/acdlife/documents/rc_pont-acd_life_doc_20210202_vecchiaia-nostrofuturo_en.html.
3. Pope Francis, Angelus address, July 26, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2020/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20200726.html.

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