



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECOND WORLD ASSEMBLY
ON AGEING (MADRID, 8-12 APRIL 2002)***

Mr President,

I am pleased to extend to you and, through you, to all who are taking part in the Second World Assembly on Ageing my heartfelt greetings, with my good wishes for the success of your meeting.

Twenty years after the First World Assembly, held in Vienna in 1982, your meeting marks a significant point of arrival; but it represents still more a thrust into the future, given that the ageing of the world's population is sure to be one of the most important features of the twenty-first century.

Through the last two decades, the United Nations Organization has promoted many initiatives aimed at understanding and solving the problems raised by the growing number of elderly people.

Of these, one of the most positive was the International Year of the Elderly, celebrated in 1999, which provided an effective opportunity to remind humanity as a whole of the need to address responsibly the challenge of building «a society for all ages».

I declared my participation in this event in a letter addressed to older people, with whom I feel a close bond not only because of my pastoral concern, but also because I share their condition. Likewise, the Pontifical Council for the Laity published a document entitled *The Dignity of the Elderly and Their Mission in the Church and the World*. On that occasion, the Catholic Church renewed the commitment she has always shown towards older people, by promoting initiatives of her own and working together with public authorities and civil society.

You are gathered now to make a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the 1982 International Plan of Action and to plan strategies for the future. Coming from all parts of the world,

you testify to the fact that the question of ageing concerns humanity as a whole and needs to be addressed globally. In particular it needs to be addressed as part of the complex problem of development.

Everywhere in fact there is taking place a profound change in the structure of population, a change which requires new social planning. This involves discussion not only of economic structures but also of the understanding of the life-cycle and relations between the generations. It may be said that a society shows itself just to the extent that it meets the needs of all its members, and the quality of its civilization is determined by the way in which it protects its weakest members.

How can we guarantee the endurance of a society which is ageing, and safeguard the social security of older persons and their quality of life?

In responding to this question, we must not be guided chiefly by economic criteria; rather, we must be inspired by sound moral principles.

In the first place, the elderly must be considered in their dignity as persons, which does not diminish with the passing years nor with physical and mental deterioration. It is clear that such a positive view can flourish only in a culture capable of transcending social stereotypes which judge a person's worth on the basis of youth, efficiency, physical vigour or perfect health. Experience shows that when this positive view breaks down older people are quickly marginalized and condemned to a loneliness which is a kind of social death. And does not the self-esteem of older people depend in large part on how they are viewed in the family and in society?

In order to be credible and effective, the proclamation of the dignity of the older person must be formulated in policies designed to ensure an equal distribution of resources, so that all citizens, including the elderly, can benefit from them.

This is a difficult task, one which can be accomplished only by respecting the principle of solidarity, interaction between generations and mutual help. There must be solidarity of this kind not only within single nations but also between peoples, through a commitment to address the deep economic and social inequalities between the north and south of the planet. Poverty, in fact, can undermine many of the principles of solidarity, creating victims among the weakest members of the population, among whom are the elderly.

It certainly helps to solve the problems connected with ageing if older people are effectively made part of society, by providing space for their experience, knowledge and wisdom. The elderly should never be considered a burden on society, but a resource which can contribute to society's well-being. Not only do they show that there are aspects of life – human, cultural, moral and social values – which cannot be judged in terms of economic efficiency, but they can also make an effective contribution in the work-place and in leadership roles. In short, it is not just a question of

doing something for older people, but also of accepting them in a realistic way as partners in shared projects – at the level of thought, dialogue and action.

Such policies also need to be complemented by lifelong educational programmes intended to prepare people for old age, enabling them to adapt to changes in life-style and work, which occur ever more rapidly. This will need to be a formation centred not upon «doing» but above all on «being», with a focus on the values which help people to make the best use of their life in all its phases, through the acceptance of both its possibilities and its limitations.

While old age is to be looked at in a positive light, and with a view to exploiting its full potential, its difficulties and the inevitable end of life should not be overlooked or obscured. It is true, as the Bible says, that people «will still bear fruit when they are old» (*Ps 92:15*); but it is also true that old age is a season of life in which individuals are victims of human frailty, and so are especially vulnerable. Very often, the onset of chronic illness incapacitates the old person and serves as an inevitable reminder of life's end. At such times of suffering and dependence, the elderly not only need to be cared for with scientific and technical means but also to be looked after with efficiency and love, so that they do not feel that they are a useless burden or what is worse reach the point of wanting and asking for death.

Our civilization must guarantee to older people care which is rich in humanity and inspired by true values. In this respect, developments in palliative medicine, volunteer help, the involvement of families – who in turn need to be sustained in accepting their responsibilities – and the humanization of centres for the care of the elderly are all decisive factors. This represents a vast field, in which the Catholic Church in particular has offered – and continues to offer – an extensive and constant contribution.

To address the fact of ageing therefore means taking account of the human person who, from birth till death, is a gift of God, his image and imprint. It means to be resolute in ensuring that every moment of human life is lived in dignity and fullness.

Mr President, upon you and upon all taking part in the Second World Assembly on Ageing, I invoke the blessings of the God of life.

From the Vatican, 3 April 2002

JOHN PAUL II

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