

## **Social Delimitations of Aging within the Theological Language of the Roman Catholic Church Social Doctrine**

**Abstract.** On September 28, 2014, the Holy Father Pope Francis participated in the day dedicated to the elders at the initiative of the Pontifical Council for the Family. The meeting took place in St. Peter's Square in Rome, where tens of thousands of grandparents and old people together with their families coming from several countries attended it. Being invited by Pope Francis, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI also attended the significantly entitled meeting "The Blessing of Long Life". The position of the social doctrine of the church was also supported, being called to contrast the poisonous culture of the "refuse" that harms our world to a greater extent. Infants and the young are avoided because they do not work, as well as the elders claiming to maintain a "balanced" economic system where not the human being but the money is to be found within its center. We, the Christians, together with good faithful people, are called to patiently build a different society: warm, human, inclusive, that does not need to throw those weak in body and mind, but on the contrary, a society that adjusts its own "step" just according to the elders (Consiliul Pontifical pentru Laici 1999, 3). It's necessary to determine the social [...] to pay more attention to the more and more alone and abandoned elders (Francisc 2014). In this paper we pursue the religious understanding of aging in the light of the Holy Scripture (long life and near-death, life experience and the progress in wisdom, aging as a symbol of eternity) and the position of the Catholic Church social doctrine on the issue of elderly care, and we explain how this social delimitation of aging is ontologically grounded for the elderly and not for someone else's interests.

**Keywords:** delimitation, social, communication, aging, responsibility, faith, wisdom

### **1. Long life and near death**

A life fact is that "years pass hastily" (Ioan Paul al II-lea, 1999, 3) and to live more thus becomes every man's desire who lives happily.

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Aging brings the wealth of a life experience meaning a growing in wisdom as well: *“Let’s years speak and the multitude of months learn the wisdom”* (*Iob*, 32.7), but it [aging] becomes a burden for the old man, who reached the end of his patience: *“Why are light and life given to the sufferer, to those with bitter soul”* (*Iob*, 3:20). So, aging takes on another meaning as it unfolds either as a road of decline toward death or as that of an expansion to happiness and eternal life (Băltăceanu and Broșteanu 2001, 50-51; 325-333). Life is a gift of God, even as “threatened” by death; a long life is desirable and it will be promised to the one who honors his parents: *“Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be longer in the land which your Lord God gives thy”* (*Ex* 20,12). Blessed life is a crown for the righteous: *“The fear of Lord adds days, but the years of the guilty ones are shortened”* (*Prov* 10:27), who will thus have the joy of seeing his children’s children: *“The elders’ crown are the grandchildren, and the children’s glory are their fathers”* (*Prov* 17.6). As Abraham, the “full of days” (*Gen* 25.8) and the righteous, after a happy and flourishing aging: *“They bring forth fruit in old age, retaining its sap and freshness”* (*Pis* 92.15), can die in peace, knowing that his life was blessed: *“He led out and said: “Look at the Heavens and count the stars, if you can count them. And he said: “So your lineage will be”* (*Gen* 15:15); *“Tobit finished his words of thanks [...] and was properly buried”* (*Tob*14.1-2). We should not expect from the old man of Israel a metaphysical reflection on human nature or nature in general etc. We find, however, an acute sense of his presence in existence and a careful observation of destiny. While continuing to closely monitor the global destiny of the people of the Covenant, the old (wise men) were primarily cared for the person’s life. They permanently showed themselves sensitive to the greatness of man and the human misery, loneliness or fear of pain (*Iob*, 7; 16) and death (*Qoh* 3); to the impression of nothingness which life leaves behind, or to the personal anguish in the face of a God who seems incomprehensible (*Iob*,10) or absent. We can see death as a biological aspect, but we cannot *naturally* understand it because it contrasts the deepest instincts of man: life. Here’s how the Council II of Vatican states this: *“In the face of death, the mystery of human condition achieves its goal. Man is not only tormented by suffering and progressive degradation of the body, but still more by the fear of his definitive disappearance”* (Conciliul Ecumenic Vatican II 1990). Yet the key to solving this problem lies in our hands, for the elder being in a state of dependency does not only need medical care, but above all, to be treated with love (Consiliul Pontifical pentru Dreptate și Pace 2007).

## 2. Life experience and progress in wisdom

During their history the nations have associated age with the experience it brings. In the Bible the “elders” are at the forefront of the communities: “Go and gather the elders of Israel” (Ex 3:16). Even if some elderly people were and are outrageously corrupt or unjust: “Three types of [people] my soul hated and I was provoked by their lives: the arrogant poor, the liar rich and adulterous old who lacks understanding” (Sir 25.2), though the white hair still deserved the respect: “Each must honor his father and mother” (Lev 19.32); “Do not rebuke the elder, but exhort him as a father” (1 Timothy 5.1) and the children were taught to support elders and parents, “Son, help your father in his old age, and grieve him not in his life!” (Sir 3:12). Given the age wisdom (Sir 25.4; Sir 32.3, Sir 42.8) and in their capacity as witnesses of tradition, the elders can speak with authority. However, they should do so with discretion and moderation because there is a danger that lurks them too, namely: instead of being open to the truth, to close to any novelty. Thus, the number of years is not enough to make the old one worthy of the honor that is given. Furthermore, wisdom may belong to the youth: “I understand more than the elders that keep thy precepts” (Psalm 119 100): “For the honest aging is not the length of time, nor measured by number of years... But the righteous, dying, condemns the wicked one, and the youth quickly reaching perfection [condemns] the long aging of the wicked” (Wis 4 8.16) and to enter the kingdom, everyone must also receive a child: “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it” (Mk 10,15). True wisdom comes from God. The mystery is that God gives man a *heart* able to discern between good and evil: “Give your servant a listening heart, as to judge thy people, discerning between good and evil” (IRG 3.9). But something happened: namely, that all men, like their forefathers, are always trying the temptation to misappropriate this divine privilege and to acquire the knowledge of good and evil through their own powers: “But God knows that the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3.5). Vain wisdom towards the cunning serpent lured them (Gen 3.1), identical to that of the scholars who judged everything according to human assessments and who exchanged the law of the Lord into a lie (Isaiah 29.15). Prophets have fought against this kind of wisdom and their teaching will reject the temptation of self-sufficient humanism: human salvation comes only from God. The wise of the Scriptures is interested in the world around him. An admiring faith urges him to see the

mighty hand of God in it. What primarily interests him is to discover how to take their lives to attain true happiness. Every man who puts into practice the art of living well is thought to be wise. He observes the world with a lucid perception, without illusions. He knows its limits, but that does not mean he also approves them. He knows what lies in the human heart, he knows what it brings joy or pain, however, the wise does not stop only to this role of the observer. Being born educator, he traces the milestones for his disciples: prudence, moderate desire, work and prayer, humility, thrift, temperance, sincerity of expression etc. The moral teaching of the Decalogue is translated into practical advice. No philosophy and no culture has a highly human image than Judaism and Christianity (Kuby 2014a, 291). The meaning of social life from the books of Deuteronomy and prophets inspires tips on alms (Tob 4.7 to 11), respect for justice *“false balance is an abomination to the Lord’s work, but the exact weight is his delight”* (Prov 11.1), the love for the poor: *“he who oppresses the poor rejects him who made it, but th one which is kind to that in need honors him”* (Prov 14.31). He substantiates his word with the facts of past experience, but the profound inspiration comes before experience. Once acquired wisdom, at the cost of a huge effort, the wise man does not want anything more than to convey peers and disciples (Sir 51.13-30), from one generation to the next (Kuby 2014b, 15), and urges to courageously engage toward *overcoming nature*. Through active participation in the spiritual perfection of creation, developing the way which in humans is given within the state of wrapping, the wise will know to fertilize the seeds it contains. Our next and the only real problem is our ontological salvation from the “anthropological revolution” in which we find ourselves as humanity. This saving can be achieved with each taking root of our lives, each coming towards ourselves.

### 3. Aging as the symbol of eternity

Aging is finally the symbol of eternity. The eternal image appears to Daniel under the image of an old man *“I beheld till thrones were set and an old man sat. His clothes were as snow and his hair like clean wool. The throne was flames of fire and its wheels a burning fire”* (Dan 7,9). In the book of Revelation the twenty-four elders symbolize the court of God that sings His eternal glory (Ap 4,4; 5:14). Aging, in particular, is a time of grace, when the Lord renews His call, to preserve and transmit the faith, to pray, to be close to the needs. Grandparents have the ability to understand difficult situations: a great capacity! And when they pray for

these situations, their prayer is hard, even strong! Grandfather and grandmother who received the blessing of seeing their children's children (*Ps* 128,6) are assigned a greater mission, namely to transmit life experience, history of a family, a community, a nation. At this point, the "dialogue between positivist sciences and humanities, which facilitates communication between bioethics and biotechnology in an easier way to both disciplines and to strengthen their mutual support" must be found. [10] The elders are obliged to share wisdom with simplicity and faith (Gavrilovici and Oprea 2013, 3-5). Happy are those families who have their grandparents closely. Grandpa is twice father and grandmother is twice mother. A nation who does not keep its elders and does not treat them properly has no future. Why does not it have a future? Because it loses the memory and detaches from their roots. When a man is suffering, this does not affect only the bodily size of that person, but the person as a whole, which must therefore receive care in an integrated manner." Respecting the person, the doctors are committed to a high value in searching remedies to meet the expectations and hopes of many patients in the world" (Gavrilovici, Cojocar and Astărăstoae 2012, 3-4). We have a responsibility to keep alive the roots in ourselves by praying, spiritual works of mercy and by proclaiming the Gospel. Thus we remain as living trees, which even during aging do not cease to bear their fruit.

#### **4. Church and elderly care**

Church stands at the intersection of space with time in which different generations are called to respond to God's loving plan. The exchange where the elders bear the moral, social and religious values represents a rich heritage for families and the world life. Not always the elders have a family which can receive them. Then homes for the elderly are welcome... provided they are real houses, not extermination sites, where the elders live forgotten, hidden, or neglected. And be it for the elderly, and not for someone else's interests. The homes for the elderly should be the "lungs" of humanity in a country, in a neighborhood, or a parish; they should be the "sanctuaries" of humanity where the old and the poor is cared for and guarded as a big brother or sister. To go and visit the elders do much good (Catehismul Bisericii Catolice 1993). But there is also the reality of the elders' abandonment, when they are rejected by attitudes which are like a true hidden euthanasia. It is the effect of that *refusing* trend which harms our world to a greater extent. Infants and the young are avoided because they do not work, as well as the elders

claiming to maintain a “balanced” economic system where not the human being but the money is to be found within its center. Both the Church and all of us (as a society) are called to contrast this poisonous culture of spoilage. We, the Christians, together with good faithful people, are called to patiently build a different society: warmer, more human, more inclusive, that does not need to throw the weak in body and mind, but on the contrary, a society that adjusts its own “step” just after the elders. As Christians and citizens, we are called to change by fantasy and wisdom these roads to confront this challenge. One of the nicest things of the family life, of the *human* family life is to comfort a child and to be comforted by a grandfather or a grandmother. The future of a people necessarily involves this meeting: empowering young people to make the elders to go and strengthen that force by remembering the popular culture and wisdom.

### **5. Theological language of social delimitation of aging**

This folk wisdom, which I have already mentioned, possesses (within theological language of social delimitation of aging) the immutability of human dignity. The demographic changes have already been outlined where the decline of birthrates has attracted the age structures unable of biological renewal. The uneven distribution of population in the world and the unjustified use of planetary resources became thus unnatural. Demographic policies imposed global development strategies that worsened the exploitation of the natural environment. During this process, the natural, authentic meaning of *development* has been lost. Within the theological language of the church social doctrine, any *development* must possess completeness, i.e. to be directed towards the true good of every person and for the whole person, where Grandma and Grandpa should not miss. We must not put our relationship with God and our neighbor away. In this situation, the intrinsic nature loses its meaning and becomes implicit poor. The existence of our families who live the spirit of the significance of losing the meaning of life reveals the shortcomings and contradictions of a society geared exclusively to the criteria of efficiency and functionality. Only this way, the occurrence of the poisonous culture of *spoilage* can be explained nowadays. Infants and the young are avoided because they do not work, as well as the elders claiming to maintain a “balanced” economic system where not the human being but the money is to be found within its center. We, the Christians, together with good faithful people, are called to patiently build a different society: warmer, more human,

more inclusive, that does not need to throw the weak in body and mind, but on the contrary, a society that adjusts its own “step” just after the elders. The elders are the school of life, capable of transmitting values and traditions and thus to foster the growth of the shoots of society who thus learn to seek the good of his neighbor. The elderly person needs, above all, the warmth of family love and then the medical care. We talk about the unfortunate situations to be raised to institutions in order for them to intervene according to specific goals. The awareness of families that are the protagonists of family policy must increase in this direction and thus to take responsibility to transform the society. This way of social delimitation makes possible the development of normative criteria for a proper settlement of various social problems, whose specific values must be considered in relation to the family nucleus to which they belong.

## **6. Responsibility of caring the elders – ontologically grounded**

Rising the living standards, the development of public health, the progress in the medical sciences have resulted in the Western society aging and thus in increasing the life expectancy of the population. A special increase of this phenomenon is expected, so that in 2050 over 53% of the EU citizens will be over 65. However, aging attracts a range of chronic diseases (cancer, dementia, degenerative neurological disease, etc.) and severely comorbidities affecting the quality of human life. Cancer itself is globally a major public health issue through the growing incidence and particularly by the burden it exerts on health systems. It is estimated that by 2050 there will be 24 million cases / year worldwide, 17 million in developing countries (Parkin, Bray, Devesa). Within the context of tapered, progressive, life-limiting diseases when, unfortunately, often there is no longer a possible curative treatment, the palliative care *bioethical and ontologically founded* may be the alternative to provide symptom control and quality of life. The care unit is represented both by the patient and his family and the means by which these goals are achieved means are the early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other symptoms, both physical, psychological and spiritual. Knowing the requirements of the *elders* must contribute to the community life, thus integrating their condition in the corresponding activities. This knowledge will enable the development of skilled interventions, the awareness and commitment of the whole civil and religious communities. The emphasis will be on the holistic approach, the patients being considered not just diseased bodies but people with

emotions, feelings, needs, social and spiritual complexes. Socrates stated the inseparable bond between these two saying that “you cannot heal the body without healing the soul”, and Jesus Christ taught us that it is the duty of everyone to go together towards the elders. More than ever the attitude of indifference, distrust and giving up to active participation, or joint responsibility of society must be exceeded. The care and assistance of the sick elderly people, of those who cannot manage themselves and of those who, due to the degradation of their old age have lost their mental faculties is a spiritual care through the mediating signs of prayer and closeness of faith. Palliative treatments give value to life and thus they consider death as a natural process of life: they neither hasten nor postpone death but they aim to maintain the best possible quality of life until death. This palliative approach is interdisciplinary, the doctor, nurse, psychologist, social counselor, priest (if applicable), and other professionals being part of the palliative team. They work together to provide a support system enabling patients to live as actively as possible until the end of life, to help families and patients to “live together” with the disease. The palliative care can be established as early as possible during an illness trajectory and conducted in parallel with other therapies (chemotherapy, radiotherapy, etc.) including both supportive treatment and the management of the patient in terminal phases. The particular impact of the need for palliative care as well as the perspective by which they are considered a right for the patients and their families, has led international bodies to take measures to facilitate access to the best possible palliative care. Thus, the Council of Europe recommended that Member States should adopt legislative policies and other measures needed to formulate a national legislative framework coherent and comprehensive for the palliative care, and the World Health Organization adopted resolutions to improve access to palliative care and starting with 24 May 2014 it asked the signatories Ministries of Health to commit to limit and facilitate the understanding of terminally ill patients’ suffering.

## **7. Conclusions**

In the article *Social Delimitations of Aging within the Theological Language of the Roman Catholic Church Social Doctrine* we provided an analysis on the theological language of the lifetime so useful to both the faithful people and to those without this foundation. We thus focused on the biblical understanding of aging as well as the position of the Church social doctrine on the issue of caring the grandfather and grandmother. At

this point, the knowledge of the ontologically based language requirements of *individual elderly* comes into being, knowledge which will allow the development of qualified interventions so that the entire civil and religious communities to become aware and engaged. As Christians and citizens, we are called to change by fantasy and wisdom these roads to confront this challenge. One of the nicest things of the family life, of the *human* family life is to comfort a child and to be comforted by a grandfather or a grandmother. The future of a people necessarily involves this meeting: empowering young people to make the elders to go and strengthen that force by the popular culture and wisdom remembrance. Therefore, it is desirable to courageously move into life, with all its stages, picking its profound significance as a way for *meeting*, *gift*, and *communication* between generations.

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