



***They Still Bring Forth Fruit in Old Age:*¹** **A Lesson on Caring in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Message by the Executive Committee of the
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused great suffering and enormous difficulties for many people who are already vulnerable. This is a cause for great alarm and concern for us as Catholic Bishops, and for the Catholic faithful of our country. The pandemic has inflicted unique difficulties and exceptional hardships on many, especially those in long-term institutional care, single-parent families, the unemployed, migrant farm workers, the homeless, Indigenous communities, those who are imprisoned, and many who were already experiencing different illnesses of body and mind. Yet the weeks and months of confinement have also provided many with opportunities for renewing relationships, finding creative ways of sharing the burden, and promoting activities which are more spiritual and meaningful in daily living. Furthermore, the elusive and unhealthy lack of balance in our lives between faith and prayer, work, family duties, community engagement, sports and hobbies has also become a reality.

While the pandemic has been experienced in different ways according to one's situation, it has also brought a new awareness of the limitations we face as a society and the challenges of the conditions of those who are vulnerable. Perhaps we have also gained a new appreciation for the basic human rights of health, social security, essential work and employment, education, health and religion which all contribute to the authentic dignity of the human person and the necessary fabric that promotes the common good. The inter-connectedness of our human experience during the pandemic lends itself to an array of possibilities and opportunities, but also of threats and temptations that need to be looked at honestly and frequently. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that the common good and human dignity are linked to “*the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard ... privacy, and rightful freedom also in matters of religion,*” as well as access to “*food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family*” (1907-08).

What emerged at the beginning of the pandemic were the conditions in long-term care facilities and similar institutions that were particularly disturbing, as government and healthcare authorities began to acknowledge. Reports by caregivers and military personnel providing emergency assistance, together with comparative studies as well as media accounts, help us recognize to what extent the circumstances are deemed “*horrific*”, “*cruel*” and “*abusive*”.² That many elderly endured weeks practically in solitude to avoid contracting the virus even from caregivers, and that many died without either the presence of family members or the comfort and strength of the Church's Sacraments and pastoral care is heartbreaking. The numerous accounts of limited and even neglected bedside care and feeding, unattended sanitary and hygienic needs,

¹ Psalm 92[91]:14.

² Expressions taken from articles listed at the end of this pastoral message.

inadequacies in living space and basic safety procedures also highlighted a chronic employment situation: too few staff, inadequately trained, poorly compensated, and many of whom were working in multiple institutions. Most upsetting and what has come to light is the admission that this situation already existed long before COVID-19 appeared on the horizon.

Those serving the elderly in these settings, as well as personal support workers, homecare providers and family caregivers, also faced the added burden and challenge that their work and its importance for all the community was often unappreciated. Their dedication and long hours of service were not always justly compensated, and their own needs, fatigue, stress, and mental health were too readily overlooked.

Pope Francis' warning against the implications of a *"throwaway culture"* in our society must be considered. The elderly are more often than not the primary victims of this culture of discarding. The Church, as the Body of Christ, has a decisive and crucial mission, and an undeniable witness to give, in caring for the elderly and the sick, and in advocating on their behalf for their dignity as human persons in our society:

"Aware of the irreplaceable role of the elderly, the Church becomes a place where generations are called to share God's loving plan, in a relationship of a 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. When we think of the elderly and talk about them, especially in the pastoral dimension, we must learn to alter the tenses of verbs a little. There is not only the past, as if, for the elderly, there were only a life behind them and a moldy archive. No. The Lord can and wants to write with them also new pages, pages of holiness, of service, of prayer... Today I wish to tell you that the elderly are also the present and the future of the Church. Yes, they are also the future of a Church that, together with the young, prophesies and dreams! This is why it is so important that those advanced in years and the young speak to each other, it is so important.³

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a renewed discussion about important changes needed in order to address both the present and future challenges facing our elderly who are already frail and compromised by the conditions in which they are forced to live. Our hope is that Canadians will gain greater awareness as to how our culture prioritizes the freedom, desires and choice of individuals, and regrettably also tends to neglect the rights and responsibilities that promote the common good of society and the dignity of every person, especially the elderly. This begins with respecting and protecting, in peace and justice, the fundamental and inalienable rights of each human person, as well as their authentic development and social well-being in the entire community.

As followers of Christ, caring for one another must take on an ever greater imperative and meaning if we are truly being authentic in the witness of our faith and beliefs. Have we failed to truly care for those in need – the ill, the downtrodden, the elderly, the abandoned, the suffering, the confused, the addicted, the disabled, the victimized, the abused and the outcasts – because we

³ Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the International Congress "The Richness of Many Years of Life", 31 January 2020.

have forgotten to see Christ in them? Is the Coronavirus pandemic an occasion for us, as Christians, to reflect on how we care for those around us and how much love, attention, tenderness, and mercy we express in reaching out to them as our Lord reminds us: “*just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me*”?⁴

The pandemic can, in many ways and for many people, serve as an important reminder of the inherent dignity of human life, its meaning and what should be most important in life. No matter the degree of isolation and privation each of us may have experienced so far in this crisis, there are lessons to be learned about the need for courage, determination, hope and steadfastness. One of these important lessons, especially for the younger generation, is that well before COVID-19, the elderly and the disabled were frequently excluded or forgotten, not only by society in general, but in many cases by their faith communities and even by their loved ones. We must not forget, however, that the undue suffering experienced by the elderly and vulnerable members of our communities because of loneliness, anxiety, depression, worry and abandonment of different kinds weighs heavily upon the collective conscience of both our country and Church. Sacred Scripture exhorts us: “*Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord.*”⁵

To have faith is to trust the Lord to guide one’s feet into the way of peace. He alone is able to turn death into life, to shine radiant light into the darkness of human despair, and to allow for lasting meaning to emerge from our manifold experiences. This global pandemic has at least taught us a priceless lesson and truth which we have perhaps forgotten: we are human and consequently not immune to suffering and death. Such profound limitations – personal, communitarian, governmental, ecclesial, societal and otherwise – have become manifest, and this calls for greater co-responsibility and accountability in caring for individuals, society and in fact the whole of creation. However, these limitations have also provided us with the opportunity to reach out to others – to our families, friends, neighbours, coworkers and strangers – in new and life-giving ways. They have allowed us to renew our sense of authentic solidarity and community by considering and treating others, especially the most vulnerable, the sick, and the elderly as valued and precious members of our communities.

Local, provincial/territorial and federal authorities promise they will re-examine the policies that led to the often-tragic situations that have arisen. Unfortunately, past experience also shows how the most well-intentioned social and economic priorities easily and quickly change. Yet no matter how determined we may be, renewal and change will be possible only with new vision, personal transformation, community solidarity, and social engagement. Commenting on the scriptural account of Cain and Abel, Pope Francis observes that all life is interconnected and interdependent: “*Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth*” (Encyclical *Laudato Si’*, 70).

As we entered into the Lenten season, and in union with Christ’s struggles in the desert, Canadians began experiencing COVID-19 restrictions. These remained in place as Christians celebrated the Paschal Mystery throughout Eastertide. Since Pentecost, the Catholic family has

⁴ Matthew 25:45.

⁵ Leviticus 19:32.

renewed its faith in the Triune God of life and love in whom humanity “*lives and moves and has its being*” (cf. Acts 17:28) and who dwells through grace within our hearts and souls. We are reinforced in eternal hope by celebrating the Mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ, and reaffirmed in the love flowing from the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Our faith reminds us that God is present in our midst as guide and protector. Fortified by these divine assurances, we can move forward in confidence, generosity, gratitude and prudence as our governments and healthcare authorities ease the Coronavirus “lockdown”. This will entail reassessing our priorities, taking an honest look at our values and lifestyle. We must let ourselves be challenged by the Lord’s calling and the present needs of our brothers and sisters.

As we slowly return to a more normal way of life, let us not forget the elderly among us who still have so much wisdom to impart, faith to share, stories to tell and joys to offer. Let us create space in our hearts, homes, families and communities to honour them and truly care for them in their weakness and their many needs. Let us welcome their unique giftedness in building a world which is more human, loving, generous, forgiving, and radiant with God’s grace. The Lord has always been and will continue to be a haven and solace for all those who have recourse to him in faith. He continues to look after his own and to be faithful to his beloved children: “*Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.*”⁶

In faith the Mother of Christ followed her Son on the road to Calvary and now shares in his glory; consequently, she too accompanies each of us as a spiritual and true mother. May Jesus Christ, the Lord of all mercy and goodness, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of families and Comforter of the afflicted, enlighten, inspire and protect us. May we be graced with a new awareness and appreciation of the gift which the elderly are to us all.

⁶ Isaiah 46:4.

Pertinent Reports, Studies and Media Accounts

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Restoring Trust: COVID-19 and the Future of Long-Term Care, Royal Society of Canada, June 2020, https://rsc-src.ca/sites/default/files/LTC%20PB%20%2B%20ES_EN.pdf

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