

Old age might diminish our freedom and strength, but it can't diminish the power of our prayers. The aged will always have a unique mission and purpose through the call to prayer and intercession. –Bishop John Folda

The gift of grandparents and the elderly

We recently celebrated the first World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly, inaugurated by Pope Francis and celebrated on July 25, the day before the Church honors Sts. Anne and Joachim, the grandparents of Jesus. By calling this special observance, our Holy Father recognizes the gifts and contributions of our grandparents and elders, and he invites the entire Church to honor these venerable members of our human family.

Pope Francis often mentions his grandmother Rosa, who was an important influence in his life. He speaks of her role in forming his faith as a boy and as a young man, and his vocation to the priesthood. Our elders and our grandparents are often wonderful witnesses of faith who hand on the faith to us, their descendants, as a gift of love. My own grandparents loved our Lord, lived their faith, and shared that faith with their children and grandchildren. I remember their prayerful devotion and their love for the Church, which certainly left a mark on me and my family. Grandparents and the elderly transmit the gift of faith not only by their words, but by the way they live their lives, transparent in faith and in hope for eternal life. Because of their advanced age, the elderly can sense the approaching day when they will meet our Lord, and they teach us to live in anticipation of that great day.

There is a certain wisdom that can come with age, a clarity about what matters and what doesn't. After long years of joys and sorrows, gain and loss, success and failure, the elderly have a perspective about life and a sense of wisdom that can be valuable for all of us. We do well to listen to what our elders have to say and to learn from their wisdom. Experience is a great teacher, and the elderly still have much to teach us about life, family, friendship, and faith. Their memories of past events and local history is a great resource for our families and our parishes. The experiences of our grandparents can help us to understand where we came from and where we're going. And in a personal way, I've always enjoyed hearing the stories of our older priests who have so much pastoral experience and wisdom about priestly life.

In their own way, our grandparents and older friends can be the contemplatives of our parishes. Their lives may not be as active as they once were, and perhaps they spend more time at home because of the limitations of age or infirmity. But their quiet lives might allow them now to pray more often, more deeply, and more generously. Our elders might have the time to pray for their families and friends, for their parishes and their pastors, for the Church and for the world. Even those who are confined by illness have the freedom to enter deeply into the mystery of Christ's own cross and suffering. As they join their own sufferings to his, they can become powerful intercessors for the needs of others, and the scope of their prayer can be practically unlimited. Old age might diminish our freedom and strength, but it can't diminish the power of our prayers. The aged will always have a unique mission and purpose through the call to prayer and intercession.

Too often the elderly are regarded as a burden, no longer productive members of society. The euthanasia movement, which becomes more aggressive with every passing year, tells us that some lives are not worth living and should therefore be ended. The elderly who are ill and infirm are especially vulnerable to this mindset, which masquerades as compassion. Rather than dispose of the elderly, we should cherish them, support them, love them, and receive the love that they have to offer. Even in old age with all its challenges, life is a blessing and a gift, and no one should assume that the elderly have nothing to contribute. If nothing else, they remind us to think of someone beside ourselves.

One common affliction for the elderly is loneliness and isolation. Oftentimes, they have lost their independence and have fewer opportunities to interact with friends and neighbors. During the past year, the pandemic forced many of our grandparents and older friends to be alone and isolated from those they loved. Visiting an elderly neighbor is a true act of charity, especially for those who are homebound and

dependent on the help of others. A phone call or a card can remind our elders that they are remembered and loved, that we are thinking of them, and that their lives are still valued.

This World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly reminds us that God has a plan for us in every season of our lives. Pope Francis speaks of his own call to the Chair of Peter in Rome even when he had already reached the age of retirement. God was not finished with him yet! Reflecting on his own experience as an elder, he says, “The Lord is always—*always*—close to us. He is close to us with new possibilities, new ideas, new consolations, but always close to us. You know that the Lord is eternal; he never, ever goes into retirement.”

To all of you who are grandparents and to all the elderly, I offer my own greeting and word of gratitude. Each one of you is a beloved child of God and a cherished member of the Church. We thank you for all you have done to bring up your families and support your neighbors. We thank you for handing on the gift of faith and witnessing to that faith throughout your lives. And we thank you for your prayer, which sustains us and brings us closer to God. Like Sts. Joachim and Anne, like Abraham and Sarah, and like all the elders in the Scriptures, you have an essential part to play in the unfolding of salvation history. We ask God to bless you and support you every day of your lives.