

“I am with you always”

Dear Grandfathers and Grandmothers,

Dear Elderly Friends,

“I am with you always” (Mt 28:20): this is the promise the Lord made to his disciples before he ascended into heaven.

They are the words that he repeats to you today, dear grandfathers and grandmothers, dear elderly friends. “I am with you always” are also the words that I, as Bishop of Rome and an elderly person like yourselves, would like to address to you on this first World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly. The whole Church is close to you – to us – and cares about you, loves you and does not want to leave you alone!

I am well aware that this Message comes to you at a difficult time: the pandemic swept down on us like an unexpected and furious storm; it has been a time of trial for everyone, but especially for us elderly persons. Many of us fell ill, others died or experienced the death of spouses or loved ones, while others found themselves isolated and alone for long periods.

The Lord is aware of all that we have been through in this time. He is close to those who felt isolated and alone, feelings that became more acute during the pandemic. Tradition has it that Saint Joachim, the grandfather of Jesus, felt estranged from those around him because he had no children; his life, like that of his wife Anne, was considered useless. So the Lord sent an angel to console him. While he mused sadly outside the city gates, a messenger from the Lord appeared to him and said, “Joachim, Joachim! The Lord has heard your insistent prayer”. ^[1]

Giotto, in one of his celebrated frescoes,^[2] seems to set the scene at night, one of those many sleepless nights, filled with memories, worries and longings to which many of us have come to be accustomed.

Even at the darkest moments, as in these months of pandemic, the Lord continues to send angels to console our loneliness and to remind us: “I am with you always”. He says this to you, and he says it to me. That is the meaning of this Day, which I wanted to celebrate for the first time in this particular year, as a long period of isolation ends and social life slowly resumes. May every grandfather, every grandmother, every older person, especially those among us who are most alone, receive the visit of an angel!

At times those angels will have the face of our grandchildren, at others, the face of family members, lifelong friends or those we have come to know during these trying times, when we have learned how important hugs and visits are for each of us. How sad it makes me that in some places these are still not possible!

The Lord, however, also sends us messengers through his words, which are always at hand.

Let us try to read a page of the Gospel every day, to pray with the psalms, to read the prophets! We will be comforted by the Lord's faithfulness. The Scriptures will also help us to understand what the Lord is asking of our lives today. For at every hour of the day (cf. Mt 20:1-16) and in every season of life, he continues to send labourers into his vineyard. I was called to become the Bishop of Rome when I had reached, so to speak, retirement age and thought I would not be doing anything new. 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.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells the Apostles, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (28:19-20). These words are also addressed to us today. They help us better understand that our vocation is to preserve our roots, to pass on the faith to the young, and to care for the little ones. Think about it: what is our vocation today, at our age? To preserve our roots, to pass on the faith to the young and to care for the little ones. Never forget this.

It makes no difference how old you are, whether you still work or not, whether you are alone or have a family, whether you became a grandmother or grandfather at a young age or later, whether you are still independent or need assistance. Because there is no retirement age from the work of proclaiming the Gospel and handing down traditions to your grandchildren. You just need to set out and undertake something new.

At this crucial moment in history, you have a renewed vocation. You may wonder: How this can be possible? My energy is running out and I don't think I can do much. How can I begin to act differently when habit is so much a part of my life? How can I devote myself to those who are poor when I am already so concerned about my family? How can I broaden my vision when I can't even leave the residence where I live? Isn't my solitude already a sufficiently heavy burden? How many of you are asking just that question: isn't my solitude already a sufficiently heavy burden? Jesus himself heard a similar question from Nicodemus,

who asked, “How can a man be born when he is old?” (Jn 3:4). It can happen, the Lord replies, if we open our hearts to the working of the Holy Spirit, who blows where he wills.

The Holy Spirit whose freedom is such that goes wherever, and does whatever, he wills. As I have often observed, we will not emerge from the present crisis as we were before, but either better or worse. And “God willing... this may prove not to be just another tragedy of history from which we learned nothing... If only we might keep in mind all those elderly persons who died for lack of respirators... If only this immense sorrow may not prove useless, but enable us to take a step forward towards a new style of life. If only we might discover once for all that we need one another, and that in this way our human frailty can experience a rebirth” (Fratelli Tutti, 35). No one is saved alone. We are all indebted to one another. We are all brothers and sisters.

Given this, I want to tell you that you are needed in order to help build, in fraternity and social friendship, the world of tomorrow: the world in which we, together with our children and grandchildren, will live once the storm has subsided. All of us must “take an active part in renewing and supporting our troubled societies” (ibid., 77). Among the pillars that support this new edifice, there are three that you, better than anyone else, can help to set up. Those three pillars are dreams, memory and prayer. The Lord’s closeness will grant to all, even the frailest among us, the strength needed to embark on a new journey along the path of dreams, memory and prayer.

The prophet Joel once promised: “Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men will have visions” (3:1). The future of the world depends on this covenant between young and old. Who, if not the young, can take the dreams of the elderly and make them come true? Yet for this to happen, it is necessary that we continue to dream. Our dreams of justice, of peace, of solidarity can make it possible for our young people to have new visions; in this way, together, we can build the future. You need to show that it is possible to emerge renewed from an experience of hardship. I am sure that you have had more than one such experience: in your life you have faced any number of troubles and yet were able to pull through. Use those experiences to learn how to pull through now.

Dreams are thus intertwined with memory. I think of the painful memory of war, and its importance for helping the young to learn the value of peace. Those among you who experienced the suffering of war must pass on this message. Keeping memory alive is a true mission for every elderly person: keeping memory alive and sharing it with others. Edith Bruck, who survived the horror of the Shoah, has said that “even illuminating a single

conscience is worth the effort and pain of keeping alive the memory of what has been.” She went on to say: “For me, memory is life.”^[3]

I also think of my own grandparents, and those among you who had to emigrate and know how hard it is to leave everything behind, as so many people continue to do today, in hope of a future. Some of those people may even now be at our side, caring for us. These kinds of memory can help to build a more humane and welcoming world. Without memory, however, we will never be able to build; without a foundation, we can never build a house. Never. And the foundation of life is memory.

Finally, prayer. As my predecessor, Pope Benedict, himself a saintly elderly person who continues to pray and work for the Church, once said: “the prayer of the elderly can protect the world, helping it perhaps more effectively than the frenetic activity of many others.”^[4]

He spoke those words in 2012, towards the end of his pontificate. There is something beautiful here. Your prayer is a very precious resource: a deep breath that the Church and the world urgently need (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 262). Especially in these difficult times for our human family, as we continue to sail in the same boat across the stormy sea of the pandemic, your intercession for the world and for the Church has great value: it inspires in everyone the serene trust that we will soon come to shore.

Dear grandmother, dear grandfather, dear elderly friends, in concluding this Message to you, I would also like to mention the example of Blessed (and soon Saint) Charles de Foucauld. He lived as a hermit in Algeria and there testified to “his desire to feel himself a brother to all” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 287). The story of his life shows how it is possible, even in the solitude of one’s own desert, to intercede for the poor of the whole world and to become, in truth, a universal brother or sister.

I ask the Lord that, also through his example, all of us may open our hearts in sensitivity to the sufferings of the poor and intercede for their needs. May each of us learn to repeat to all, and especially to the young, the words of consolation we have heard spoken to us today: “I am with you always”! Keep moving forward! May the Lord grant you his blessing.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 31 May 2021, Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary