



CARE FOR THE ELDERLY AND SICK CONFRERES OF THE PROVINCE AND HEALTH CONCERN IN THE CONTEXT OF CHURCH DOCUMENTS AND LEGISLATION OF THE ORDER.

*Biedna starości, wszyscy cię żądamy,
A kiedy przyjdiesz, to zaś narzekamy
(Jan Kochanowski, Na starość [On Old Age])*

I. INTRODUCTION – GOING DEEPER INTO A SUBJECT

It is a real pity that we tend to bring two categories of people together, i.e., the sick and the old, the latter group being euphemistically called in Polish ‘the oldies.’ But it is not true that every sick person needs to simultaneously old and every old person is necessarily sick. It seems to me that we often talk about those two groups because we consider them (at least subconsciously) to be the kind of people who deserve some special care. This care which ‘has a special place in the life characterized by a brotherly union’ appears in post-synodal adhortation *Vita consecrate* but it is the subject of only one and a half sentence – where it is put together with its ally, i.e., ‘cordial concern.’ It is interesting that after providing readers with a general context (‘in certain regions we observe the increase of the consecrated people who are advanced in age’) and motivation (‘there is an obligation of showing mercy and gratitude to the old’) this document (in the same sentence) says that the elderly ‘bear witness to the truth which is extremely necessary to the Church and its institutions.’ It also mentions their mission which ‘remains important and brings fruits even when, due to old age or sickness, they have to give up some forms of their activities.’ This argument ends with an optimistic conclusion that both groups may ‘well give a lot from themselves’ on the condition that the other members of a congregation (i.e., the young and healthy) ‘will be able to remain in a close union with them and listen to them patiently.’ It also says that ‘there are many paths which allow the elderly to respond to their vocation.’ Hence, I want to talk here about the ‘role’ of those members of our congregations that are in need of some special care. Deliberately, I do not want to focus my attention exclusively on ‘care’ since, in my opinion, it simply marginalizes them and makes them totally passive figures.

1. ‘My heart pounds my strength fails me’ (Ps. 38,11) – who is ill?

Modern medicine says that: ‘a disease is an ailment of the body or mind that causes discomfort, dysfunction, distress, or death to the person afflicted or those in contact with the person. Sometimes the term is used broadly to include injuries, disabilities, disorders, syndromes, infections, symptoms, deviant behaviors, and atypical variations of structure and function’¹. Dictionaries consider any disease to be a pathological process. A patient who suffers from a disease is the one who feels pain, is subjected to

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disease>.

tortures, grows weaker². There are kinds of diseases that come and go; leave traces or not. There are some diseases that once they invade a person, they will never leave him again. Such diseases – chronic, prostrating, lengthy and incurable – destroy our organisms entirely.

In the Bible³ disease appears, above all, as a form of weakness and disability; an accumulation of all suffering and wickedness. That is why eschatological prophecies talk about all diseases being abolished in the kingdom of heaven. When a disease invades righteous men, e.g. Job or Tobias, it may be a providential experience which aims at testing the faithfulness of the individuals. Jesus sees a disease as evil which is a burden to a man. He considers it to be the result of sin and the sign of Satan's power. The sight of suffering evokes in him the feelings of pity and makes him act. Not distinguishing between disease and demonic possession he drove the ghosts away and healed the sick. He did not heal each an every individual but 'took upon himself all our weaknesses and carried all our ailments'⁴; the cross carried the burden of evil and cleansed the world of its sins – the consequences of which were diseases.

Any disease with all the suffering involved has always been one of the most problematic aspects of human life. It has always been a test. A sick person becomes aware of his weaknesses, limits and finiteness. Every disease opens a perspective of death. Jesus did not abolish suffering but gave a new meaning to it. He filled it with his presence. The Church has a special sacrament – Anointing of the Sick – in his treasury of divine graces. The result of this rite is 'a gift of the Holy Spirit that renews confidence and faith in God and strengthens against temptations to discouragement and anguish at the thought of death and the struggle of death. It thus leads to spiritual healing with forgiveness of sins and, sometimes, to bodily healing as well.'

A sick man is a challenge for the Christian community. Tradition has inscribed a special, sixth element, among spiritual acts of mercy, i.e., visitation of the sick. In a canonical agenda of the responsibilities of a superior man there is a fragment about 'care of the sick and visitation of those in need.'

The Constitution of our order includes this responsibility for the sick together with a much older passage about 'the weak and advanced in years.'⁵ The most likeable piece can be found in St. Benedict's rule: 'above all and most of all the sick need to be provided with care; one should serve them as one serves Jesus Christ.' But Benedict would not be himself if he did not mention pragmatically the other side of the coin: 'Let the sick remember that brothers do serve them for God's glory and should not distress those who take care of them.'⁶

2. 'The length of our days is seventy years, or eighty, if we have the strength' (Ps. 90,10) – who is old?

From the biological point of view conception initiates the beginning of a human life. The rhythm of life can be easily inscribed into the four seasons of the year or particular sections of a day. From this perspective youth is spring (morning), adulthood is summer (noon), old age is autumn (evening) and death – being the finale of our earthly life – reminds us of winter (night). Every period of the ones mentioned before has its own beauty, its own features, dynamics and temperature.

So when a man is born he inexorably moves towards the final hours of his life which are hidden under the unnamed calendar entry. With the priceless gift of life we simultaneously receive the death penalty. Despite a man's life being directed towards death, it is extremely difficult to set some very precise borderlines. The scientists talk about the limited growth, physical condition being deteriorated, professional career impossible to be continued, etc. – all of this resulting for instance from the cells being calcified.⁷ This process may be hastened up or slowed down, depending on various factors. That is why

² W. Doroszewski, Słownik języka polskiego [Dictionary of Polish], (individual entries).

³ Leon – Dufour X., Słownik teologii biblijnej [Dictionary of biblical theology; entry: disease – cure]

⁴ Mt 8,16.

⁵ Constitution CM,26.

⁶ Rule, XXXVI.

⁷ J.Z. Young, *Zarys wiedzy o człowieku*, Warszawa 1978, pp. 242-247.

the retirement age does not always go hand in hand with the biological one.

If, following a generally accepted definition, old age starts when one is more or less 60 and ends with one's death, we can make some further divisions: early old age (60-70), late old age (75-89), longevity (90 and more)⁸. Longevity is not measured by the number of years but by wisdom 'quotient' which – in the light of the Bible – is considered to be a sign of God's grace and special blessing for a man.⁹

According to some general opinions old age is synonymous with limitations, sickness, infirmity and pain. And, indeed, old age is far from being an idyll. Instead, it is a heavy burden. In Polish there is a number of proverbs and sayings which refer to the troubles that accompany old age, e.g. Bones ache when old age comes; Old age does not come alone but it carries a handful of ailments. The elderly are in great pain and, often, feel shame due to their feeling of being not needed any longer, their helplessness, decrepitude, and clumsiness.

The dark sides of old age are also present in the Bible. The description of old age are full of biological realism. Ecclesiastes, when discussing old age, talks about it in a vivid and metaphorical way using such terms as: the days of doom, solar and lunar eclipses, all songs growing faint, fear of heights, search for the silver cord, golden bowl broken, pitcher shattered at the spring¹⁰. But this is not the major voice of the old age theology. The elderly carry a deposit of God's law and blessing for the future generations. Old age is an award from God.¹¹ An old man is a treasury of wisdom which is 'a vapour of the power of God, certain pure emanation of the glory of the almighty God, the unspotted mirror of God's majesty, and the image of his goodness'¹². Such wisdom is the greatest treasure of an old man and gives the most profound meaning to his old age. This is the source of the praise directed towards old age.

But this wisdom does not come automatically. It is a gift from God who allows men to count their days in such a way that they may, step by step, discover God – a giver of time and wisdom – as the ultimate and highest aim and meaning of their lives¹³. An old man is so sagacious that he knows that there is no point in counting on many more years to come; on the contrary, he knows that his life is now a matter of days. Every day brings one closer to death: 'Oh Lord/I know my days are numbered/There are so few of them/Enough only to gather the sand/which will cover my face' – to use the words of a renowned Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert¹⁴. An old man – while asking God for a gift of wisdom – knows that he first needs to perform an examination of conscience and sum up his life so as to know where he is and what is the distance between himself and the paradigm of sanctity. He realizes that the devout and fervent prayer for mercy, happiness and blessing may well be the helpful grace which will assist him on the final road to the House of the Father.

In this way an old man – if full of wisdom, love, happiness, quietude, mildness, gentleness, understanding, goodness, kindness, forgiveness, warmth, and prudence – can truly become a treasure which will deserve our full appreciation, respect and admiration.

The tradition of our Order is well aware of that. Our constitution has a beautiful passage which pays respect to the elder member of our congregation: 'the old of age are close to our hearts; their presence is the blessing in our homes'¹⁵. The elder confreres – through their suffering and spirit of prayer – are valuable members of both the Church and our congregation.

3. 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path' (Ps. 119,105) – where is the light?

⁸ W. Pędzich, *Ludzie starzy*, Warszawa 1986, p. 11.

⁹ Exodus 4,16

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes 12, 2 -8.

¹¹ 'With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation' (Ps.91,16); 'Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained by a righteous life (Proverbs 6,31)

¹² Book of Wisdom 7, 24-26

¹³ Ps 90,12.

¹⁴ From a poem called 'Brewiarz' [Prayer Book].

¹⁵ Constitution CM, 26,1.

The Light – indispensable when speaking about the role of the elderly and sick in our congregations – is present in various church documents. But it also needs to be said that there is no general overview of the whole problem; only specific examples are examined in the documents of first rank.

The 1994 instruction about ‘brotherly life in a congregation’ while talking about several specific situations also mentions the case of old priests. It has recently become more problematic due to a decrease in a number of priestly vocations and the development of medicine which prolongs an average life-span. This document pays attention to two issues: one being ‘the need to take care of the right reception and appreciation of the presence and services of the old confreres’ the other ‘the necessity to provide them – in the spirit of brotherhood and in accordance with the consecrated way of living – with spiritual and material care.’

It further says about profits that are brought by the elderly; about their being inestimable help and support to the young and their testimony, wisdom and prayers being endless sources of apostolic and spiritual encouragement. The presence of the elderly may well have a positive influence on the congregation. An older confrere who resists the troubles and limits of his age and who keeps cheer, love and hope alive offers some priceless support to the young. His testimony, wisdom and prayer are the inexhaustible sources of help in their spiritual and apostolic life. On the other hand, a confrere who takes care of the older priests confirms the evangelic credibility of his own institution as a ‘true family gathered in the name of our Lord.’¹⁶

Priests that are advanced in age appear in the 1992 ‘Adhortation to the formation of priests’ as well as in the ‘Directorium about the ministry and life of the priests’ from 1994. They are addressed in those documents and encouraged to believe that ‘there is still a significant role for them to perform’ and that they can be ‘worthy teachers and tutors of other priests.’¹⁷

On the 1st of November 1998, the Pontifical Council for the Laity (as if following the decision of the UN to name 1999 the Year of the Elderly) published a fundamental document – ‘Dignity and Role of the Elderly in the Church and the World.’ This document discusses the following issues in 5 consecutive chapters, i.e., meaning and value of old age (I); an old man in the Bible (II); difficult experience of the elderly being everyone’s experience – with special focus on marginalization, care, formation and work, participation (III); the Church and the elderly (IV); guidelines for the ministry aimed at the elderly (V). For the sake of this paper the first chapter is of the utmost significance since it names and categorizes the charisms of old age: unselfishness, memory, experience, mutual dependence, and a more general vision of the world.

To complement it, on the 1st of October 1999, Pope John Paul II published a moving letter (Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to the Elderly) in which he encouraged the addressees of the letter to discover the richness of old age and propagate culture that accepts and cherishes old age. Defending the usefulness of the elderly, the Pope shows them as the guardians of common memory and those who express unanimously shared ideas and values. The letter ends with a prayer to the Lord of life: ‘And when the moment of our definitive “passage” comes, grant that we may face it with serenity, without regret for what we shall leave behind. For in meeting you, after having sought you for so long, we shall find once more every authentic good which we have known here on earth, in the company of all who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith and hope.’

II . THE ROLE OF THE ELDERLY – THE CHARISMS OF OLD AGE¹⁸

A charism – generally understood – is a gift from God which aims at changing a man’s heart and is bestowed upon a man for the sake of other people. Every charism has a different mission and task to accomplish. Following the charisms of old age I want to discuss the role of the elderly and sick in our congregations. The gift of old age can be considered a kind of charism on its own terms since it makes us

¹⁶ Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor, 68,69.

¹⁷ Pastores dabo vobis, 77.

¹⁸ For methodological reasons I will speak only about the old confreres who, generally speaking, also represent the sick.

approach the ‘doors on which Jesus knocks’ and – by becoming deaf to the voices of this world – listen to this knocking with an inner ear and with a better understanding. The whole community where an old man lives can benefit from this special aural experience

1. ‘And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you?’ (Lucas 6,33) – unselfishness consecrated.

Unselfishness is an action which stems from some good and decent reason; the one that does not have any ulterior motive, look for personal profits, or hold an expectation of being paid back. Unselfishness – whose synonyms are altruisms, devotion, and dedication – naturally excludes such questions as ‘what for?’ and ‘why?’ Jesus talked about in a greater length during a Sermon on the Mount. An unselfish man does not make profit out of a relationship with another man; on the contrary, he gives his services for free and does not expect any form of retribution, gratitude, human warmth or cordiality.

This form of action makes one abandon all calculations, needs and coercion. It excludes demands, pettiness, hatred, vindictiveness, suspicion and envy. An old man who – due to some hard work has guaranteed a sustainable and secure future for himself – is more prone to concentrate on ‘being’ rather than ‘having.’ ‘Having’ is usually beyond the horizon of his interests and deeds. Moreover, in a consecrated form of life, this ‘having,’ in a materialistic and consumerist sense, was silenced down long time ago as the result of the vows of poverty.

If a man retires, he most often gives up some more active forms of life and makes space for the others. In congregations this ‘step back’ is usually more passive and does not always mean that the person has reached a retirement age. Moreover, it is always important that such a step should be accompanied by a considerable dose of dignity and respect, i.e., both sides should approach each other with mutual trust and brotherly love as well as with an aim of responding to God’s will. Otherwise, it becomes a form of politics where only functionality and efficiency count.

This retirement is based on the act of leaving a priest out so that he can be more with God and to offer services to him in a slightly different way. It is contemplation time, i.e., a period of life considered an occasion for some spiritual growth. In a way a consecrated life is in itself a sign of unselfishness that knows no borders: ‘it expresses unselfishness with no limits and love which is particularly important in the world threatened by the influx of small and passing things.’¹⁹ It is the kind of life running against the contemporary culture of pragmatism and utilitarianism. But what specific shapes does this unselfishness take – especially when the consecrated hands already remain on the handle of the doors leading to eternity?

First, there is general readiness for sacrifice and eagerness to serve God and one’s brothers. It is ‘a radical gift which is given out of love for Jesus Christ and through him – to every member of human family.’²⁰ Radicalism of gift and sacrifice is measured by our love of God and our brethren. Love is – always and everywhere – the most important since it is a primary principle of the world. This love is unconditional and its source is our care for another human being. It gives our humanity its shape and profundity.

There are many possibilities of expressing this love in a consecrated life. Old age does not absolve from an imperative of service. The elderly who live with and for God are rightly expected to be the witnesses of consecration and brotherly love as well as charisms and tradition.

‘Being’ starts with such basic things as active presence in everyday life matters and chores, giving advice disinterestedly, giving up on constant recalling former successes, keeping one’s suffering and ailments silent. An old man does not need to prove one’s worth. Neither does he need to control or organize anything. He does not have to show off and appear to be strong, bright and intelligent. On the contrary, he should support the young in a creative way without the necessity of working for oneself and one’s own name. Unselfishness of old age manifests itself in cordiality towards new ways of development which are characteristic of new generations of priests. It is freedom from comparisons and demands; it is

¹⁹ VC. 105.

²⁰ VC. 3.

friendly help directed towards what is young and new. Finally, it is creative support of the efforts of others and promotion of new methods and ways of functioning.

Another manifestation of unselfishness is an ability to listen to what other people say; listen in a careful and active fashion. It means that an old man becomes someone who understands and accepts. Someone who can be trusted and with whom the young can share their worries. Such a man ensures security and creates a space which welcomes everyone with their past, uncertainties, fears. This new space should become a new home. Such an attitude has a purely apostolic aspect – it is a serving charism of old age. It is true love that makes one aware of the beauty that is in each and every individual. It is love that helps other people to open themselves to new messages and respond to their vocation and calling of a given time.

Unselfishness is a basic element of life which is characterized by an appreciation of the successes of others and, simultaneously, calm resignation from what used to be the source of personal glory and pride. An old man is just himself – more than anyone else. He is free. He does not care for his own business but, above all, thinks about the others and takes the time he has been given as the time of grace carefully chosen by all-knowing God.

2. ‘I think it is right to refresh your memory’ (2Peter 1,13) – charismatic memory.

Cognitivism²¹ has distinguished between different types of memory and associated various sectors and structures of the brain with those types. Memory is a predisposition of the brain to acquire, store and recall the experienced emotions, feelings and knowledge. In other words: memory is a relatively stable record of experience. Memory moves within the limits established by time but in an anticlockwise fashion. It establishes its roots in the past; goes back in time to recall emotions, adventures and pieces of information. History, roots, returns, recalling, looking back – all those terms are inscribed into a sphere of memory; memory which is actively carried out by the old.

Old confreres are not the redemptive memory but rather the living charismatic memory which carries values and structures, history and tradition, customs and services, charisms and mission – in other words everything that is associated with their ‘little fatherland’ in which (as the result of God’s calling, choice and vocation) they are supposed to live. It is thanks to them – the guardians of the charismatic memory – that the young can learn the love of a consecrated life. It is because of them that the spirit of congregation can pass on. They express ‘common ideas and values which are the basis and the rule of monastic living.’²² Memory as a gift of old age encourages the young to discover the past and, in this way, find their roots and establish some sort of continuity. Those are the returns to the beginning of our order, our founder, and great historical figures. It is also a return to the most recent history and the way of keeping it alive, understanding it and making the relations between various generations more profound.²³

One of the most important experiences of old age is the need to clear one’s memory. At this point a man realizes that he is far from any ideas he had about himself when he was young. He knows that his time has come to an end and that practically nothing will be finished. At least now he desires to discover some truth about himself and by cleaning one’s conscience he wants to come to terms with his past and with the past days and events. All of them need to be acknowledged and presented to the merciful Father: ‘Past has not been wasted if the future is good’²⁴.

It is precisely a prayer and contemplation that should be everyday ‘exercise’ of charismatic memory. With age this memory can grow weaker but what should not be annihilated is ‘the testimony of one’s devotion to the redemptive will of God – devotion which is nourished by prayer and penance.’²⁵ A confrere advanced in age – who has more time for this kind of exercise – should be expected to pray eagerly and provide an example of some perfect contemplation practices.

²¹ It is a multidisciplinary branch of knowledge which deals with cognitive processes, including the functioning of the brain.

²² Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to the Elderly, s 10.

²³ H. Hatko, *Charyzmaty starości* [Charismas of old age] in: *Życie konsekrowane w trzecim wieku* (quoted), p. 128.

²⁴ B. Jasiński, *Mądrość służby* [Wisom of sercnice], Wrocław 1991, p. 49.

²⁵ VC. 44.

3. ‘Ask the former generations’ (Job 8,8) – life experience.

Etymological hearing can identify in a given ‘experience’ a whole number of traces associated with bearing testimony to the truth. This word, i.e. experience, carries some sort of reality which one lived through, got to know, acquired and finally stated that he could bear witness to it. Experience is, hence, a kind of bridge building activity which establishes links between the past and the present, between the old and the young. By rejecting one’s past, a man does not only lose the ground where one can start building the bridge but he also annihilates the space in which the present time is rooted.

Long lasting life gives a number of opportunities to collect precious instances of experience.

Every congregation usually makes a multi-generational family. It includes today’s and yesterday’s young as well as today’s and tomorrow’s old. They all create one whole family which grows in faith that should attain ‘to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ’²⁶. Such a community shows a picture of the Church which is one body with many limbs and every limb has its own individual task to be accomplished. Those limbs are linked in the manner of communicating rubes. Does it really need to be explained what sort of impact they have on each other? How much energy is given by the young to the old? How many values are to be shared with the young by the elderly?

The gift of remaining in the presence of the elderly in a monastic house makes this house an icon of family in which everyone is needed; being together is simultaneously being with God and creation of multi-generational unity. This presence is quiet and faithful, hospitable and open – if limited, then due to some unwelcome opportunities, but never as the result of the lack of generosity of the heart. This presence is a living testimony and message sent to our confreres. This message is marked by ‘hope that is justified and defended.’²⁷ ‘Testimony of such people is very much needed to the Church and its individual institutions; the mission the elderly is and remains fruitful even if – as the result of old age or health problems – they have to resign from some sort of activity.’²⁸

It is not enough if some old brother has the courage to share and recall his past experiences. Such a man needs to find a community which remains united and is capable of listening to him.²⁹ I used to know some retired missionary who collected many photographs, postcards and mementoes from his missions to the most remote corners of the world. But what comes out of that? Nobody in the whole monastery was interested in listening to his stories and watching his collections. His guests turned out to be the only rewarding listeners. This terrible custom of ignoring the experience of the elderly accumulated throughout their long lives apparently made its way to monasteries as well. The art of listening has disappeared in spite of the fact that the one who can listen is the only link between the world that has ended and the one that is and will come. It is truly important that consecrated people could ‘waste’ their time by listening to each other!

The work on the balance between brotherly life and apostolic activity is a specific kind of experience of the elderly which can be easily shared with the young. The importance of this balance is confirmed by the Church’s teaching which reminds us that the monastic life ‘should be filled with apostolic spirit and the whole of our activity permeated by contemplation’³⁰.

Thanks to the life-long accumulation of experiences the elderly priests have gained wisdom and maturity. They look at everyday life in a different way – be it plans and future endeavors as well as ideas and values which are the basis of the consecrated life. Often they are treated as the ‘living rule’ and looked up to and followed in one’s attempts to learn a good monastic life. Hence, their advice and guidance should always be sought.

4. ‘And do not forget to do good and to share with others’ (Hbr 13,16) – mutual dependence.

²⁶ Ef 4,13.

²⁷ 1Peter 3,14-15.

²⁸ VC. 44.

²⁹ VC. 44.

³⁰ VC. 9.

John Paul II says: ‘The signs of human frailty which are clearly connected with advanced age become a summons to the mutual dependence and indispensable solidarity which link the different generations, inasmuch as every person needs others and draws enrichment from the gifts and charisms of all.’³¹ A man is a social being and he naturally aims at keeping and maintaining inter-personal and communal relations. Even if such relations are destroyed by a tendency to take top positions and playing the first fiddle, one rule becomes still valid: nobody is capable of living alone in the world; nobody is a lonely island. That is why one of the final callings in the Epistle to the Hebrews (which in itself is full of practical guidelines and words such as ‘remember’ and ‘do not forget’) is the one which reminds us of taking good care of interpersonal relationships and practicing charity since the God’s true service happens not only in the sacred areas of cult but it embraces the lives of all faithful as well.

Between the inhabitants of the monastic house there are also invisible links and mutual dependence. But it is a bad sign if the elderly feel powerless and unable to change their situation. When they cannot explain the reasons for their behavior and beliefs and feel that they do not belong to the community any longer. Perhaps it is a manifestation of social denial in which the weakest are always left behind and they have to rely exclusively on themselves. But nothing – either disease, immobility, or memory loss – can exclude the elderly from a given community. Every period of human life is endowed with its own beauty and goodness and unveils some truth about a human being. Every age has its aims and objectives as well as its values which are precious to the whole social group. An attitude to the elderly is a measure of the civilization of life and brotherly love.

If it is true that old and young age are the two poles of the same consecrated reality then what kind of obligations do the both sides have? First the old – as more responsive to the everyday challenges posited by God’s scripture; they should be of greatest possible support to the young and perform the function of both fathers and mothers as well as spiritual instructors to the young. If treated with love, they can give much more than one ever imagines.

This giving usually takes form of some pieces of advice, words offering hope and encouragement, silent prayer or suffering. In fulfilling this task – precious due to a devoted amount of time, experience and capabilities – the personal charisms are of greatest importance and assistance.

The community that is statistically young should pay attention to the right way of welcoming the elder brothers. It does not only involve some generous acknowledgement of their presence but, above all, human solidarity and brotherly help. It needs to be remembered that when one helps the elderly, he invests in his own future too. Through work and service he grows towards the fuller form of living. He discovers that he needs the others and that the others need him as well. Moreover, in this way the young confirm the evangelic credibility of the community as ‘a true family gathered in the name of Our Lord.’³² One of the priests suffering from MS at the age of 51 writes movingly about this phenomenon: ‘Today I am just a wreck of a man – totally at the mercy of others. It is my confreres that help me to change a position in bed; they feed me because I cannot hold a spoon or glass of water. They take me to various rooms in our house where I can be with other members of congregation. They sit next to me and press the keys on a computer and write down the words that I dictate.’³³

The young need the old and vice versa. Such a meeting stimulates and awakens the hearts of the young. It also directs them to aims other than power, success, efficiency and physical strength. It releases in them goodness, kindness, gentleness, cordiality. It shows God who is hidden in weaknesses which help a man to keep one’s integrity. This brotherly relation is profitable to both sides. When the elderly recognize the kindness and efforts of the young, they rejoice because they see that the young follow in their footsteps. This situation makes them abandon their fears because they see the continuity of generations. Consequently, it leads to the proliferation of gratitude towards those who keep the mission of their life continued. The goodness that lasts, the goodness that they have tried to achieve throughout their lives and which, for various reasons, could not be fully reached, helps the old in the process of gradual death.

³¹ Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to the Elderly, 10.

³² *Perfectae caritatis*, 15.

³³ R. Marcinek, ‘Z listu do redakcji’ [Letter to Editor], *Vita consecrata* 11/2004

III. SHORT ENDING – THREE DEMANDS WITH QUESTIONS

The charisms of old age discussed before are gifts and as such they clearly define the role and objectives of the elder members of our congregations. Every charism is a gift for the others, for the whole community. Of course, it needs to be remembered that those gifts are not bound to appear in each and every community in the same the number of instances and having the same parameters. Likewise, their reception and results are different depending on a congregation. That is why we need to think about the ways to minimize the lacks in this particular area.³⁴

1. **‘Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head and honor the face of the old man’ (Leviticus 19,32) – a demand for taking good care of the old and sick.**

It seems to me that the first demand on the part of the leaders of various congregations is to take into one’s heart the necessity of care over the sick and older confreres. ‘Cordial care that they deserve is not only the result of gratitude and mercy directed towards the old. It is also a sign that the Church and its institutions need the testimony of the old. Old age and health problems should not lead to giving up one’s activities because the essence of the apostolic mission is not actions but most of all bearing witness to one’s total devotion to the redemptive will of God’³⁵

Taking good care of the old confreres means fulfilling three major tasks: ‘accept their presence, help them and appreciate their virtues.’³⁶ Those tasks do not cause any troubles if a community – just like an average family – consists of great-grandchildren, grandchildren, children, parents and grandparents. Such a chain guarantees individual development and care for the weakest in a given chain.

This care is based on the acceptance of the elderly and sick living in a community being and on making them aware that they are loved despite their physical condition or financial charges. They can never be a millstone round somebody’s neck. Their services should be appreciated; spiritual and material care guaranteed as well as proper functioning in the life and mission of the congregation. Finally, they should know that in the time of loneliness and suffering they can count on the rest.

The general remarks presented above bring the following questions:

- Is an imperative of solidarity a form of real or only virtual reality in a consecrated form of life?
- Do the houses of the province (for the elderly and sick) respond to the expectations of their inhabitants? Is it a good solution?
- How to react to the anti-testimony of the elderly?
- Where is the borderline between the care for the old, privileges for them and their being pampered and spoiled?

2. **‘But when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go’ (J 21,18) – formation towards old age.**

The Church while taking about the formation to old age is in its opinions unanimous: ‘consecrated people should get ready for old age as early as possible by means of discovering new forms of community functioning and participation in a common mission. They should respond to the challenges of old age by means of remaining culturally and spiritually young and alive as well as by means of prayer and work – as long as their physical condition allows. The supervisors should organize courses and meetings aimed at

³⁴ One soul not add that our congregations could become ‘higher schools of love’ if all of us could and wanted to take from those charismas.

³⁵ VC. 44.

³⁶ Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to the Elderly,11.

individual instruction which should result in the old members of a congregation working for the benefit of a community and themselves.³⁷

Experience teaches us that everyone may live till their dotage. Equally, even a young person may become chronically ill. So we should instruct everyone and teach them how to deal with old age – just like we teach about love, community or missions. We should not keep ourselves worried in advance but rather get ourselves ready for the decent and fruitful experience of old age or ailments. ‘Old age causes troubles which need to be faced and confronted in advance’³⁸. The primary imperative of the formation towards old age is the willingness to serve the elderly. Usually, the elderly are cheerful and full of goodness. Of course, we often encounter the other type: disappointed, catty, vindictive, demanding, etc. One should think about the reasons for this kind of behavior. Where does the difference come from? It is hard to generalize but we can say that as the twig is bent, the tree’s inclined. The people who throughout their lives are always unhappy, domineering and overbearing will most likely remain like this when they’re old. The consequence hence is that since the very early years one should be exposed to and equipped with the best possible values.

The Church is aware of all the difficulties that the elderly face and provides them with some very specific instructions. Dotage or disease enforces helplessness and uselessness upon us - which are highly frustrating. What we need then is the gradual resignation from various forms of activity which never means total abandonment of active life.

The following questions arise:

- In what way (if at all) old age formation is inscribed in ratio formationis institutionis?
- Are there any reasonable formation programs for the consecrated old people?
- Do the experience and abilities of the old confreres are popular in congregations? Or are they rather the unwanted stock that everyone longs to become depleted?
- Are ‘those social programmes enabling the elderly to continue to attend to their physical well-being, their intellectual development and their personal relationships, as well as those enabling them to make themselves useful and to put their time, talents and experience at the service of others’³⁹ organized in our congregations?

3. ‘But when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go’ (J 21,18) – getting oneself ready for death.

Self-formation to old age and the efforts on the part of supervisors and communities themselves will not bring fruits if an old person is not willing to make his relation with God deeper and more profound. In a normal mode of life and spiritual development the body becomes weaker but the spirit becomes younger and stronger. This spiritual energy should be consciously aimed towards the Easter experience of Christ’s death and resurrection as well as towards a new life.

When one is young and active this experience is not always appreciated – especially under the influence of new trends which push the Cross to some more remote areas of interest. In old age death becomes a much closer perspective. ‘It is natural that with years passing by we get used to an idea of death. The borders of life and death move and we are closer to them. If life is a pilgrimage to a heavenly fatherland, old age is the time when we are most willing to think about eternity.’

The third and fourth period are an occasion of reaching some true similarity with Christ by means of fulfilling (with him) the will of Father and by offering oneself to him. We unite with Christ in the final hour of his agony. In the context of resurrection, a consecrated man hopes that God the Father makes use of the last hour of our lives and completes the mystical process of maturity. ‘Death is expected and

³⁷ VC. 70.

³⁸ Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to the Elderly, 16.

³⁹ Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to the Elderly, 16.

considered the final and most perfect act of love and trust.⁴⁰

The following questions arise:

- Are we ‘saddened by the fact of death or do we find some comfort in the promise of future immortality’⁴¹?
- Do I consider death to be ‘a “passage”, a bridge between one life and another, between the fragile and uncertain joy of this earth to that fullness of joy which the Lord holds in store for his faithful servants the end of earthly’⁴².
- Do I believe that my life bears fitness to Christ who is my life and resurrection? Do I long for the moment when ‘Lord will come with his angels in his glory’?

⁴⁰ VC.70.

⁴¹ Prefation of the dead.

⁴² Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to the Elderly,16.