

Aging people. Contribution of French Catholic Family Associations and their European Federation.

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We have all been ageing since birth and as part of the continuum of life, are an integral part of our societies.

First remark: He who says "ageing" does not say "handicapped" by age or illness. On the other hand, illnesses that are disabling both physically and mentally are not inevitable. Medical research continues to progress and gerontology offers a listening ear and progressive solutions. It is most often the fear of old age and loss of autonomy, which seem to be an insurmountable obstacle in today's societies.

Second remark: According to countries' differing demographic curves, the percentage of people over 70 years old is more or less important, and the percentage of working people making up their family or close entourage is also variable. Political decision-makers are aware of these data and must anticipate, by means of appropriate decisions, how these different generations will live together in terms of housing, care, quality of life, generational transmission, respect for the dignity of all life given and received, of all life in its duration and all lives in their own state of health...

The vast majority of our contemporaries come from families, the first place of unconditional acceptance. Fortunately, there are few orphans and wards in the nation today, but family breakdowns put a large proportion of homeless people on the streets. Families are, however, for the most part places where bonds are forged and maintained in a reciprocal way.

The passers-on of memory, builders of Love, such as the elderly, who are inevitably ageing, the family help and support, the lightening of tasks that they willingly bring to the younger generations are undeniable and free factors of social cohesion! Reciprocity of care and solidarity between generations are the basis of every human community.

During this period of generalised confinement our associations have been keen not to cut links, and further, to develop new ones by going beyond the circle of listed members, by proposing accessible webinars, the use of YouTube, telephone channels and small neighbourhood services. Little children were encouraged to keep in touch with their grandparents by phone, messaging, WhatsApp, video and appointments via zoom or other means such as coming to their windows to say hi! All of them were asked to keep in touch with older neighbours so that they could provide the daily services of shopping and delivering food and drink "with respect for barrier gestures" - that goes without saying.

When body language is constrained, inventiveness is invited to find solutions so as not to remain without relationships. Radio, television or other screen broadcasts have made it possible to keep in touch with places of worship, so that the spiritual dimension of community prayer is accessible to all generations, at various times of the day, which it was necessary to know and share. This has been a comfort despite the limitations imposed on the practice of the sacraments. Public service broadcasting, as well as foreign broadcasts of Holy Week, played their part in ensuring that human anthropology was honoured in its three dimensions: body, mind and soul.

We deeply deplore the situation of "lockdown" experienced in the EHPADs, which we shall describe as 'lay', with a few exceptions linked more to the will of their leaders than to the application of humane instructions. The solitude that this has engendered, the 'unseen' deaths without anyone to hold hands, added to the impossibility of providing spiritual support to the dying, even though these gestures of affection and respect are the first markers of so-called civilised societies, result in many regrets and sometimes remorse for the survivors. No High Council, flourish though it may, has addressed these questions of simple humanity, nor the family wounds caused. We have here worrying markers of dehumanisation and factors of "psychosocial distress" in the making.

The time of lockdown coincided with Easter, and for those who were in contact with nature, springtime encouraged them to receive Creation as an ever-new gift and to enter into the contemplation of what habit ends up masking: everything is gift! We are only more or less vigilant managers, who will be accountable to the next generations, since "everything is linked" ...". When the elderly is not taken care of, there is no future for the young", also says Pope Francis.

The European Federation of AFCs has issued communiqués on the occasion of the World Day against abuse of the Elderly. Together with COMECE, it has set up a working group (first meeting on 12 June) involving the under-secretary of the dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, Gabriella Gambino. Among the solutions proposed:

- more family to protect the elderly,
- the concern to foster a family-friendly culture throughout Europe,
- the creation of new solidarity structures favourable to maintaining ageing people in their environment of family and friends. Recovering and rediscovering a taste for life for all our societies is an ambitious task. For the AFCs it is a necessity of "human fraternity" which has the merit of being within everyone's reach: it is the policy of small steps and concentric circles, so that the family once again becomes the place of solidarity between generations, "the nucleus that gives life to all sectors of society" Pope Francis to the FAFCE, Rome 01 June 2017.