

## EDITORIAL

### Caring

In honour of the International Day of Older People, the Crescendo Global Network invited organisations working for and with older people to a meeting on 1 October to discuss ways in which we can maintain, and even recreate links with and between older people.

Covid-19 forced us to postpone this meeting. To replace it, we asked each of the NGOs and international congregations that should have attended to record their experiences of this pandemic. To our gratified surprise, we received 20 texts, all of them very interesting but very diverse according to their geographical origin, the culture of their authors and the realities described.

They came from FAFCE, the Brothers of Charity of Ghent, CICIAMS, the Little Sisters of the Poor, VMI, Fondacio, ATD Fourth World, the Daughters of Charity and AIC. You will find them on the Crescendo website: [www.reseaucrescendo.org](http://www.reseaucrescendo.org) All, in one way or another, are based on "taking care". In the article below you will be able to read the essence of what has been expressed and, in particular, the actions taken and the prospects for the future.

A theologian has read all these documents and proposes pastoral guidelines to be implemented in order to facilitate future care.

Caring is the subject of the Letter 'Samaritanus Bonus' which emanates from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It recalls "the mission of those who are in contact with the sick in the critical and terminal phases of life". It reviews all end-of-life situations and provides a pastoral perspective for those concerned.

The independent expert, in her latest report, notes that, at the global level, the "global lack of data and evidence-based information on older persons is in itself an alarming sign of exclusion and makes it virtually impossible to develop appropriate policies and normative measures". This has direct consequences for care-giving.

Dominique Lemau de Talancé

FAFCE : Federation of European Catholic Family Associations;  
CICIAMS : International Catholic Committee Nurses and Medico Social Assistants  
VMI : Life Ascending International  
AIC : International Association of Charities

## POST

### Maintaining Social Connections in Times of Pandemic

As an alternative to the meeting scheduled for October 1 on maintaining social ties with and between seniors, we asked the heads of the organizations that were to participate, to send us their written contributions. We asked 3 sets of questions. The following is a summary of the responses received.

#### **As a movement, an association, ... how have we lived these months of crisis, of confinement (due to the pandemic)?**

"This has been a difficult period with an international assembly cancelled, and the election via the internet of a new Board of Directors that began its work in unprecedented and difficult conditions.

On the positive side: the commitment of the international team, the invention of new ways of working, the development of virtual work meetings (with Zoom.), the concern to remain in communication with the national associations via Facebook, newsletters or the website, the participation in a prayer chain of the Vincentian family for the victims of Covid.

In the field with the elderly: the inventiveness of proposals, the presence at a distance through telephone calls, letters, a concert, flowers, cakes, home shopping... the welcoming of female students in our activities, the reinforcement of spiritual accompaniment". (AIC but also FAFCE, VMI, Fondacio)

The volunteers of AIC Germany CKD experienced the pandemic with feelings of powerlessness, their own fears and also resignation. Many wanted to help, but were unable to do so because of their advanced age and illness (AIC Germany).

For many, "These were terrible weeks: fear, the anguish of seeing a new case in the home; grief at the deaths; the need, at the beginning, to source for ourselves masks and gowns; the enormous increase in work with the scarcity of staff because of Covid or confinement, the quarantining of sick or testing-positive Little Sisters, the transfer imposed on sick residents into a dedicated area of the home, etc. But also: months of intense solidarity, months of incessant questioning, months of creativity in order to create links and vitality, increased closeness with residents; for many, a renewal of interest and affection towards the elderly" (PSDP).

Moments of major ethical questioning: "Political choices led to the fact that, in the event of a Covid infection requiring hospitalisation, preference had to be given to "younger" people who would have a better chance of recovery. It is an ethic where the value of the human being is reduced to the usefulness that someone can still have for society" (Brothers of Charity of Ghent and CICIAMS).

VMI was asked by Dr. Vittorio Scelzo (Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life) for information on how confinement was experienced and on the initiatives taken to care for the elderly in their country. Interesting facts and measures taken: Benin notes that the government relies on NGOs and religious congregations.

In Uganda, lockdown brought young people back to their families. A health watch was set up between neighbours to identify a case of Covid-19 very quickly. In Tanzania, the increased need for elders to pray in times of pandemic was noted. In Mauritius, maximum use was made of mobile phones and everyone was encouraged to get news from neighbours on a regular basis. In France, the MCR set up a daily "Confined... but not isolated" (VMI) section on the internet.

## **2) How did the elderly people with whom and for whom we work experience the months of crisis and confinement linked to the pandemic? Difficulties? Positive aspects? What challenges?**

"We deeply deplore the situations of "confinement" experienced in the EHPADs, the solitude that this has engendered, the stealthy deaths without anyone to hold the hand of the sick, added to the impossibility of providing spiritual support to the dying, whereas these gestures of affection and respect are the first historical markers of so-called civilised societies. No politician has

addressed these questions of simple humanity, nor the family wounds caused. These are worrying markers of dehumanisation and the seeds of 'psychosocial distress' (FAFCE)

"In general: A dreadful loneliness. Many elderly people have died without their families being able to say goodbye. Unable to go out or move, they have lost a lot of memory and mobility. In the old people's homes, the situation has been and remains terrible: All visits have been suspended. Many older people have died. Lack of doctors and staff to care for people. No admission to hospital because there is no respirator for the elderly" (AIC Spain, USA, El Salvador).

"For the elderly, the most difficult period was that of confinement to rooms. It was mainly during this period that communication tools helped to give them back their joy and courage. Masked and respecting distances, outings in the park of the house in small groups or individually, were organised thanks to the presence of civic volunteers" (Daughters of Charity France but also PSDP).

"All of us have been marked by the joy of contact during visits, the faces that open up, eyes that shine... The care staff trying to be attentive to everyone in reassurance, in assuring continuity of the activities usually proposed (manual work, outings on the terrace, soft gym), as well as the telephone, written links, or by the new means of communication (video) which have been favoured, however this does not replace the direct interactions so important to the elderly subject" (Daughters of Charity Greece).

"Most of the sharing groups have been able to continue to function

thanks to the telephone used to keep in touch with one another and thus reduce isolation and the anxiety linked to this situation. In the best of cases, the use of digital tools made it possible to maintain virtual meetings. It is also important to underline the importance for these people of being able to watch or listen (via radio, television, podcasts, YouTube...) to programmes offering times of prayer, meditation (especially during Lent) or interviews on all kinds of concerns" (Fondacio).

### **3) What are we doing, what are we planning to do, to help older people to find, to implement, a project that gives taste and meaning to their lives?**

"Within the framework of accompanying the elderly, a Centre for the accompaniment and provision of activities has been created: Spiritual accompaniment through the offering of intergenerational prayers, sharing the word of God. Development of intergenerational income-generating activities (agriculture, pig and rabbit breeding, small business. Sanitary support (health care, clothing and environmental hygiene). Training of volunteer counsellors in communication techniques with the elderly. Food care for inactive elderly people" (AIC Burundi).

"Carry out a survey on the housing situation of registered elderly people, identify the precariousness of their housing and carefully assess the possibilities of effective support for the rehabilitation of the rooms in these houses, as well as the improvement of hygiene conditions and the well-being of their families. There is an urgent need for this service as well as to identify the financial difficulties which will certainly have to be faced by all" (AIC Brazil).

"An entry into a relationship - in the long term if possible - which allows older people to maintain exchange, encounter and communication. To help them to unify their memories, often scattered, by adopting active listening; to help them to find in themselves the answer to their questions; not to speak in their place, to send them back to the question by reformulating it, to respect everything that is expressed; to value their desire to be useful, to render service, to transmit. For example, by asking them about their history, by borrowing a book from them, by involving them in activities. "(AIC France)

FAFCE, together with COMECE, has set up a working group involving Mrs Gabriella Gambino, Under-Secretary of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life. Among the solutions proposed: more families to protect ageing people; the concern to foster a family-friendly culture throughout Europe; the creation of new solidarity structures favourable to keeping ageing people within their family and friendships. Regaining and rediscovering a

taste for life at all levels of society 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 at the FAFCE, Rome 01 June 2017.

AIC BURUNDI



## Ageing in times of pandemic

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Institut Catholique de Paris,  
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Society of the French Bishops' Conference

The crisis linked to Covid 19 is transforming our lifestyles and changing us: "we find ourselves scared and lost. Like the disciples of the Gospel, we have been caught by an unexpected and furious storm"<sup>1</sup>. As I write these lines, we do not yet know how this global crisis will develop. But we do know that many people have suffered and are suffering today. And we also perceive that we are called to take our part in dealing with the crisis, each with his own voice.

It is in this spirit that associations and religious congregations close to older people have questioned themselves about the reality and challenges experienced during this period. Their contributions, which can be read on the Crescendo website, highlight shadows as well as light. I will take up some aspects of them before outlining some milestones and aspirations for working towards a common future.

### The shadows of a suffering world

The crisis has shaken everyone. Older persons, their families and caregivers have suffered particularly from the disruption of ordinary activities and the severing of friendships and family ties. Isolation in an institution or at home, described as "appalling loneliness" by an AIC team, may have caused deterioration in their physical and psychological health. Fears, depression, guilt, loss of memory and mobility, general slippage, etc. were noted. Without the support of the usual communities, spiritual life was more difficult for many.

The deaths experienced without end-of-life exchanges and the usual rituals were particularly traumatic for the carers and relatives: "suffering from not having the right to see the bodies again before a funeral at the very least", writes a Little Sister of the Poor. Ethical dilemmas were raised concerning the lack of medical means and support at the end of life.

Other ethical questions arise in the economic field: having enough food can be "a challenge" in Burundi as in Brazil; the unequal access to digital tools is also highlighted. Acting as a magnifying glass, this crisis has brought into focus the social doctrine of the Church and the importance of economic and social issues in thinking about the accompaniment and inclusion of the elderly.

1: Pope Francis, extraordinary moment of prayer in times of pandemic, March 27, 2020  
2- Pope Francis, Fratelli tutti, n°79

## Signs of hope

This is a dark description. Yet there are many signs of hope. We have seen creativity at work in these difficult times: becoming aware of the relevance of digital tools for a remote presence, many have embarked on Zoom or WhatsApp sessions; some have committed themselves to the internet, such as the MCR with its daily column "Confined... but not isolated", others concerned about the digitally excluded are distributing tablets. Imagination has also been at work to make daily life easier: making masks, activities in the corridors of EHPAD, shows put on outside windows etc.

On a more institutional level, the search for collaborations with other associations is also promising. These examples testify to the ability to mobilise hearts and minds to respond to new challenges and to strengthen courage.

Another sign of hope is the commitment of young people, accompanied by the deployment of numerous solidarity initiatives on the part of both volunteers and staff in retirement homes. Some young people have produced radio programmes, others have brought in shopping or played music and put on puppet shows. Staff have selflessly mobilised themselves, some of whom were voluntarily confined with residents. Testimonies are there to show the solidarity at work: a community of the Daughters of Charity in Istanbul observed "many gestures of solidarity to help the most underprivileged". This fraternity in action echoes the call of Pope Francis: "Let us be aware of the fragility of every man, woman, child and elderly person, and through this attitude of solidarity and care, resemble that of the Good Samaritan"<sup>2</sup>.

In the spiritual field, consciousness has been heightened, both on behalf of the accompanied elderly and on the side of those accompanying them: the spiritual life is polyphonic. Certainly, community and sacramental life is important, and its deprivation may have caused suffering. But the spiritual life is also gratitude before nature long contemplated, or signs of attention to the other.

A religious sister shares this thought: "to transform into prayer your marks of friendship, your freely-offered relationship or the confiding of sorrows". We prayed for the victims and the sick, we also gave thanks for the beauty of nature or the fact of being alive. Those working in the field expressed their astonishment and wonder before these various mobilizations as well as their pride "in having responded present, active, inventive and responsible" (AIC France).

### **Milestones on a path**

Nourished by these views from the field, actions and reflections, five points are highlighted, given that depending on the culture and country, they will have a different colouring: the situations are diverse, as are the responses. All this requires an understanding of situations, skills and the acceptance of a certain indeterminacy.

**Recognising reality.** Seeing the diversity of situations: who are we talking about when we talk about older people? The reality is multiple: dependent or very active people, isolated or surrounded, at home or elsewhere, more or less precarious, etc. This research calls for a sustained dialogue between all stakeholders, particularly families, carers, volunteers and professionals, and institutions so as not to fall into wishful thinking.

**Questioning ourselves** rigorously about our practices and asking new questions. Is what is usually done still relevant? The world has changed, what can we keep from our ways of doing things, what can we change? What training should we put in place? What access to digital tools? Should there be more activities related to nature, eco-responsible approaches? To nourish the spiritual life, why not share the Bible together? ....

**Listening** to the voice of the elderly should be a priority, in order to do *with* them rather than *for* them. To consider them as people who will be involved in what constitutes the fabric of their lives, and thus recognize their dignity. This calls for training, particularly in active listening. This can also be achieved by encouraging them to be bearers of memories: 'The stories of the elderly do a great deal of good for children and young people, because they connect them to the lived history of the family, the

neighbourhood and the country<sup>3</sup>.  
How can we support them in this?

**Working on social justice issues.** This may involve working to ensure that health and social protection systems are genuinely open to all older people, combatting the structural causes of poverty that affect families and therefore grandparents, working to ensure fair pay for carers etc. The question of where older people live is an important point; how and with whom should we think about it? In order to initiate new processes that are well rooted in reality, dialogue with institutions is important, not forgetting the development of areas of co-responsibility for carers/families/the elderly.

**Helping to recreate the "us"** that may have been battered by individualistic pressures. Participate in a culture of inclusion and fraternity: recognize what is already working well, thank families who are doing the best they can, listen to what young people are proposing.

*'A land will be fertile, a people will bear fruit and will be able to generate a positive future only insofar as it gives life to relationships of belonging between its members, insofar as it creates bonds of integration between generations and the various communities that make it up; and also insofar as it breaks the spirals that confuse the senses, always distancing us from one another.'*

*Pope Francis, Fratelli tutti n°53*

3 : Pope Francis, Amoris Laetitia, n°193

## ■ INTERGOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

### Report of the independent expert on the promotion and protection of the human rights of older people

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session45/Pages/ListReports.aspx>

The independent expert is interested in the importance of data for the realization of the human rights of older persons as a prerequisite for informed and evidence-based decision-making and normative action. In particular, she analyses the current lack of data on older persons, its causes and effects on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, and the opportunities and risks of the data revolution in this area.

In its conclusions, the Commission states that the data currently available are largely insufficient to capture the reality of the lives of older persons, including the enjoyment of their human rights. This lack of data and evidence on the elderly is in itself an alarming sign of exclusion and makes it virtually impossible to develop appropriate policies and normative measures. Overcoming these obstacles to the realization of the human rights of older persons requires a fundamental conceptual change in methods and procedures, which takes into account the intertwining of digital and analogue realities, known as "digitization".

## ■ NEWS OF THE CHURCH

The Holy See has just published 2 important documents:

The **FRATELLI TUTTI** Encyclical on fraternity and social friendship  
[www.vatican.va/.../documents/...enciclica-fratelli-tutti.pdf](http://www.vatican.va/.../documents/...enciclica-fratelli-tutti.pdf)

The **SAMARITANUS BONUS** Letter on the care of people in critical and terminal phases of life

[www.vatican.va/.../documents/...samaritanus-bonus\\_fr.html](http://www.vatican.va/.../documents/...samaritanus-bonus_fr.html)

## Review

*L'Évangile, tout bonnement*  
de Monique Tonglet-Vélu  
Éd. Parole et Silence, 2020

This book by Monique Tonglet-Vélu relates nine conversations she had as a visitor to the sick or elderly, often isolated, sometimes over many years. Between these "chapters", a few lines, brief observations noted in passing as flashes or sparks, express the author's admiration and love for those who have given her a new access to the Gospel, sometimes with great difficulty. Human dignity, divine grace, respect, burial, silence. These are pearls acquired at the great cost of life, death, solitude and courage.

Monique Tonglet-Vélu is the wife of Jean Tonglet. Both are volunteers from ATD Fourth World.