

“It’s Beautiful to be Old.” In Search of Emergent Catholic Social Teaching on Old Age

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Abstract

The proportion of older people in the population is rapidly increasing, both nationally and globally. This demographic shift poses some pressing practical challenges for governments as they seek to provide care for an ageing population; but in addition, it raises sociocultural and theological questions about how the role and significance of older people is understood in contemporary developed economies. In response to these challenges, the present paper attempts to identify the outlines of an emerging Catholic Social Teaching on old age in the encyclicals and words of the last three popes. Two key themes are identified which inform a distinctive Catholic perspective on old age. These are the continuing pilgrimage, role and contribution of older people to the end of life on the one hand, and their challenge to the values of a ‘throwaway culture’ on the other. The foundational significance of these themes for an emerging Catholic witness form the basis for the concluding recommendations.

Keywords

Ageing, Catholic Social Teaching, Old Age, Teaching, Theology

“It’s beautiful to be old. . . . The quality of a society, I’d say of a civilization, is judged by how well it treats its elderly.” - Benedict XVI

Introduction

The last fifty years have undoubtedly been a time of intense change on a number of fronts: technological, economic, social and cultural. One of the most profound changes globally has been the

demographic shift towards older people, with a declining birth rate and increasing life expectancy. The proportion of the global population that is over 60 is expected to roughly double between 2007 and 2050, with the population of the over 80s increasing more rapidly still.¹ In the industrialized countries of Europe and the Americas, this shift has been occurring against backdrop of falling birth rates, leading to some concern in relation to a number of pressing medium-term social challenges (such as the need to provide affordable care for those who cannot benefit from family-based care).²

The shift has also spurred national agencies to rethink the role and position of older people in society as a whole, preparing for a future in which the needs and resources of the old and very old³ become relatively more prominent for planning and policy. In the particular context of the UK, the response of successive governments to the needs of older people has historically been piecemeal, as responsibility for social care was not included in the National Health Service (NHS) but left in the hands of Local Authorities;⁴ and pension provision was by means of a patchwork of private and public bodies. There has however been a recent policy initiative from central government to think coherently of a future in which the population continues to age, the ‘Future of Ageing’ Project (2013-2016) culminating in the strategy document *The Future of an Ageing Population*.⁵ This tracks the impact of an ageing population on the future of work, education, housing, the family and health care, demonstrating along the way the profundity of the social, cultural and economic change taking place.

At such a time of profound change it is appropriate to ask whether the Church has any particular perspective to offer from the standpoint of its Social Teaching. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) has a distinct way of understanding the purpose and destiny of human beings in their societies and the pastoral mission of the church has from its inception included at its heart the care of the frail and elderly. The Church’s understanding of the elderly, their role and needs has been

¹ United Nations, *World Population Ageing* (New York: United Nations Publications, 2007).

² Government Office for Science *The Future of an Ageing Population* (2016) Obtainable from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/535187/gs-16-10-future-of-an-ageing-population.pdf.

³ As life expectancy has increased, traditional definitions of old age have become problematic. Most analyses now distinguish between the ‘active’ old, understood as largely autonomous and characterised by general good health, and the ‘frail-old’, ‘very-old’ or ‘old-old’, for whom increasing support is needed with daily living and health care. The distinction is convenient for some purposes, such as planning future care needs. But it needs to be treated with caution as the notional boundary is set variously at 80, 85 or 90 and functional definitions vary widely.

⁴ Timmins, N (2017) *The Five Giants: a biography of the welfare state* (New Edition. London: Collins, 2017).

⁵ *The Future of an Ageing Population*.

informed and deepened through this pastoral mission; in the developed world in particular, it has been informed by offering residential and supportive care for older people, including those with no means of family support. The purpose of this paper is therefore to seek to identify the distinctive elements of Catholic Social Teaching on ageing and the elderly, with a view to informing current and future policy debates.

Towards an Emergent Catholic Teaching

Although the care of older people has always been considered part of the pastoral mission of the Church, the 'classic' foundational documents of modern Catholic Social Teaching say very little about ageing and older people as a distinct theme. This reflects the fact that, until the latter half of the twentieth century, relatively few people could expect to live into old age. The needs and role of older people in Church and society start to be given explicit attention within CST during the pontificate of John Paul II. He and his two successors to date have given a prominent place to the question. This concern is expressed in their words and through their active witness, which represent the 'growing tip' of the Church's emerging wisdom and witness on the subject.

The scope of this analysis will therefore be the period spanned by the last three popes and will cover three types of documents. First, there is the one document which seeks to set out and apply this emerging teaching in a methodical way. This is the 1998 document from the Pontifical Council for the Laity, *The Dignity of Older People and their Mission in the Church and in the World* (DOP).⁶ This document provides the basis and starting-point for our appraisal of current Church teaching. It is detailed and extensive but is primarily concerned with a single aspect of the topic under discussion: the role and pastoral needs of older people in the Church, its life and mission. While it provides much useful material, its relatively narrow scope and lack of explicitly theological thinking limits its usefulness for the current task.

Secondly, there is the specific teaching of the popes on matters concerning the elderly, as expressed in addresses and apostolic exhortations. These are relatively abundant and give an insight into papal thinking on issues closely related to the theology of older people. They are of varying authority, and not designed to provide a theological grounding in the subject on their own.

⁶ Pontifical Council for the Laity, *The Dignity of Older People and their Mission in the Church and in the World* (Strathfield, St Pauls Publications, 1998).

Finally, there are the encyclicals whose themes and emphases can be clearly traced in the popes' words. These do not refer to the elderly in any detail, if at all; but they lay down the broad structure of thought in which an emergent theology is to be shaped. These will form the context for the analysis.

This analysis will therefore take place in three stages. First, DOP will be discussed as the only example of a developed document specifically focussed on older people. This will give the pastoral context in some detail. Secondly, the material from the time of John Paul II will be analysed: beginning with the statements he made on various occasions regarding the elderly, key themes from his thinking will be extracted. These will then be expanded upon and interpreted in the light of the encyclicals which punctuated his pontificate. A similar process will be followed for the pontificates of Benedict XVI and Francis, except that these two popes will be considered together. This is because Benedict himself said very little, but his continuing presence has had a decisive effect upon the content and interpretation of Francis' thought.

Methodologically, I have attempted to apply an interpretative framework developed by Boileau who warns us to take account of the differing authority of different types of text; to place them in their context in relation to events and to each other; and to in each case understand the 'world of the text'.⁷ This makes it possible to identify recurrent and generalisable themes in the material which are grounded in the main concerns of the encyclicals. Although the result cannot claim in any sense to be authoritative, I have attempted to capture the 'growing tip' of emerging Catholic Social teaching concerning the elderly, for the purposes of guiding current thinking and practice.

1. *The Dignity of Older People (1998)*

DOP was composed by the Pontifical Council for the Laity as part of the Church's contribution to the UN International Year of Older Persons (1999). It is, nevertheless, an internal ecclesial document, intended for "Episcopal Conferences, bishops and priests, men and women religious, lay movements and associations, young people, adults and older people themselves"(9).⁸ The model here is not of Catholic spokespersons addressing the world with exhortations and warnings, but of a Church which changes the world by its counter-cultural witness and acts of mercy.

⁷ Boileau, D. *Principles of Catholic Social Teaching* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press 1998) pp. 12-14.

⁸ Paragraphs are not numbered in the original document, but have been numbered here for ease of reference.

This call is timely and of some urgency, because a 'silent revolution' – demographic, social, economic, cultural, psychological and spiritual – has rendered the traditional approach of the Church inadequate: "... the current situation is unprecedented in many respects. It [the Holy See] urges the Church to revise her approach to the pastoral care of older people in the third and fourth ages. New forms and methods, more consonant with the needs and spiritual aspirations of older people, need to be sought; new pastoral plans ... need to be formulated. These are essential conditions for encouraging older people to make their own contribution to the mission of the Church and helping them to derive particular spiritual enrichment from their active participation in the life of the ecclesial community"(8).

On the face of it, this introduction presents a fairly conservative approach to the status of older people as needing pastoral care and support in the first instance, so that they may be helped to make their own contribution. The main body of the document is however more radical, insofar as it reverses this order of priorities. Thus, it begins by challenging the accepted narrative of old age as a period of decline and loss of agency and proposing one in which old age is a time of distinctive charisms. It then proceeds to explore how these charisms issue in a distinctive contribution to the life of the Church; and only then raises the question of what sort of pastoral care should be extended to address the distinctive needs of older people.

So the opening section of the document (The Meaning and Value of Old Age, 10–21) challenges the cultural framework within which our model of old age is constructed: "The perception of old age as a period of decline, in which human and social inadequacy is taken for granted, is in fact very widespread today. But this is a stereotype." It is a stereotype with potentially destructive consequences, because "There are those older people who are capable of grasping the significance that old age has in the context of human existence, and who confront it not only with serenity and dignity, but as a time of life which offers them new opportunities for growth and commitment."(11)⁹

In the first place, the Church needs to confront this stereotype: "We therefore need to situate old age in the context of a precise providential scheme of God who is love. We need to accept it as a stage in the journey by which Christ leads us to the Father's house (cf. *Jn* 14:2). Only in the light of the faith, strengthened by the hope

⁹ The section continues, "But there are others—more numerous in our own day—to whom old age is a traumatic experience, and who react to their own ageing with attitudes ranging from passive resignation to rebellion, rejection and despair. They are persons who become locked into themselves and self-marginalized, thus accelerating the process of their own physical and mental deterioration."(11)

which does not deceive (cf. *Rom 5:5*), shall we be able to accept old age in a truly Christian way both as a gift and a task." (12)

The character of old age "both as a gift and a task" is expressed in a range of Charisms proper to old age: disinterestedness; memory; experience; interdependence; a more complete vision of life (17). DOP's argument is that there are attributes that can only be possessed in old age, and that therefore older people have something irreplaceable to offer society as a whole.

This first section provides the conceptual and theological framework within which both the social teaching and the pastoral recommendations of the document are located. After a section on *The Older Person in the Bible* (18-25) which in terms of the overall structure represents something of a digression, the document moves to a statement of solidarity in section III (26-37). The overarching theme (and the title of the section) is that "older people's problems are the problems of us all", in two senses: first, because all of us will (hopefully) become old eventually; but second, because the social evils which affect older people impoverish every member of society. It names marginalization as the chief evil, expressed in a number of ways: as inappropriate institutionalization; lack of opportunities for education and employment; and the loss of a participatory 'voice' in the public sphere. It concludes, "To stem the culture of indifference, rampant individualism, competitiveness and utilitarianism which are now threatening all areas of society, and to remove any form of segregation between the generations, a new mentality, a new attitude, a new mode of being, a new culture need to be developed. A form of prosperity and of social justice needs to be pursued that is compatible with the objective of defending the centrality of the human person and his dignity" (37)

At this point, the focus of the document moves from society to the Church. Section IV (38-52) begins by examining the particular apostolate of older people as an outworking of the charisms identified above, asserting that "older people bring religious and moral values that represent a rich spiritual endowment for the life of Christian communities, families and the world"(38). Section V (53-58) is entitled *Guidelines for the pastoral care of older people* but, characteristically, begins with an inventory of ways in which older people themselves exercise a ministry in the Church. Some are distinctly activist (such as Ecclesial Associations); others derive from the experience of old age itself (such as contemplation and suffering with Christ) while others again centre on the relational life of the Church (notably, the role of older people in the family). Only then does it move to consider the pastoral ministry needed to enable this level of participation by older people, and suggests thirteen desirable objectives for pastoral activity, from heightened awareness of the needs of older people to intergenerational solidarity. While these stop short

of developed ecclesiology, they enshrine an implicit vision for the Church as fully integrating the contribution of older people as well as serving their needs.

Overview

The most striking feature of DOP is the sequence and structure of its parts. Social policy documents generally start with practical problems such as the need to provide care for frail elderly individuals, and then work back through measures of social, financial and health needs to a problem-based portrait of the recipients' character and needs. By contrast, DOP begins with a diagnosis of a destructive narrative of old age which characterizes it in terms of decline and loss of agency; then proposes a counter-narrative in which older people are understood to have distinctive charisms to offer to society and the Church. Only when it has established the essential value and importance of older people does it move to consider the type of pastoral intervention that will support them. Even then, the recommendations of DOP are shaped not by the need to fulfil the needs of passive recipients, but to preserve the agency and contribution of older people through promoting integration and participation.

In this distinctive structure, it is possible to discern a central feature of much CST, which begins with the personalist principle (the dignity and integrity of the human person as an individual); but then moves outward to consider how that dignity is expressed and engendered in participation in society and solidarity with others. In contrast with the values of those industrialized societies which are struggling with the 'silent revolution' brought by demographic change, DOP makes two strong claims:

- (1) It challenges the characterisation of older people as mere consumers whether active or passive. It locates human dignity in a process of solidarity and participation which is at odds both with the medicalisation of old age and the empty hedonism of 'successful aging'
- (2) It affirms that older people have valuable gifts to offer to society. The problem is with a society that cannot see the value in them. Therefore (and there are echoes of the social model of disability here) the need is to change society – its values and the narratives in which it entraps older people. Only then do we move to the 'problem' of social care

However, the account presented by DOP needs to be supplemented for the present purposes in two ways. First, some account needs to be

taken of the fact that 20 years have elapsed since the publication of DOP, and the context has changed significantly.¹⁰ Secondly, in order to bring the insights of CST to bear on policy in addition to Church pastoral care, it is necessary to widen the scope of DOP beyond its context in the Church to consider the overall picture in more detail. In order to take account of these points and deepen our exploration of the themes raised by DOP, our attention will now turn to the wider context visible through the expressed thinking and actions of the last three Popes. While this may seem on first reading to be an excessively ‘top down’ approach to the development of teaching in the Church, the particular advantage of a focus on the Popes’ own words and actions is that they are both authoritative and contextually-sensitive: as will be seen, the development of teaching in this area has tended to take place on specific occasions (such as papal audiences for older people) where the changing circumstances of older people are to the fore. Because the themes identified above have both arisen and been elaborated and applied in response to concrete social questions, they provide a basis for the Church’s response to projected changes in government strategies for older people across the developed world.

The Pontificate of John Paul II

John Paul II is the first Pontiff to demonstrate a particular concern for the elderly and to develop a distinct theology and ecclesiology for them. Characteristically, this is rooted in a social analysis of the ‘signs of the times’, in which families are buckling under the pressures of industrial society: “In this kind of context, the elderly, often enough, finish by becoming an encumbrance.”¹¹

This diagnosis of the neglect of the elderly as arising from the pressures brought to bear on the family in industrialized societies is rooted in the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981). Here the primary concern is to reaffirm the centrality of the family as the fundamental unit of society and the vehicle for the transmission of faith and wisdom down the generations. The majority of the document

¹⁰ For example, the number of people over 75 living alone in the UK has increased from 1.31m to 2.21m (Office for National Statistics 2012, 2017) which must surely influence our understanding of ‘solidarity’.

¹¹ “The problems of the elderly today differ considerably from those with which they had to contend in the past. There is, firstly, the fact that the numbers of old people have been steadily increasing . . . Then there are certain factors proper to the modern industrial society, the principal being the alteration in the pattern of the family . . . Further, it is often isolated and unstable, sometimes even broken up. . . and to these may be added in our times the (sometimes immoderate) search for comforts and tendency towards consumerism. In this kind of context, the elderly, often enough, finish by becoming an encumbrance.” (Pope John Paul II, Message for the 16th World Communications Day, 10th May 1982).

is directed towards parents of young children, but one section is given over specifically to the role of the elderly. Against a tendency to 'set the elderly aside', "The pastoral activity of the Church must help everyone to discover and to make good use of the role of the elderly within the civil and ecclesial community, in particular within the family . . ." ¹²

The family, as an experience of communion and sharing, is the "first and vital cell of society" (42, 43) and an instance of a "Church in miniature" (49): in the exclusion of the elderly from the family, both Church and society are damaged. The contribution of older people is essential to the full mission and identity of the Church, for "You still have a mission to fulfil and a contribution to make". ¹³

The active contribution of older people becomes an emerging theme across John Paul II's pontificate. Thus, in the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (1988) he develops the notion that older people can and should participate in evangelisation, as "their duty even in this time in their life when age itself provides opportunities in some specific and basic way". ¹⁴

Finally, his *Letter to the Second World Assembly on Ageing* (2002) could be seen as providing a summary of his main concern:

"It certainly helps to solve the problems connected with ageing if older people are effectively made part of society, by providing space for their experience, knowledge and wisdom. The elderly should never be considered a burden on society, but a resource which can contribute to society's well-being . . . In short, it is not just a question of doing something for older people, but also of accepting them in a realistic way as partners in shared projects – at the level of thought, dialogue and action." ¹⁵

¹² Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* 1981, 27.

¹³ ". . . you are not and must not consider yourselves to be on the margins of the life of the Church . . . but active subject in human existence which is rich in spirituality and humanity. You still have a mission to fulfil and a contribution to make" (Pope John Paul II, audience 23 March 1984 cited in DOP (7)).

¹⁴ "I now address older people, oftentimes unjustly considered as unproductive, if not directly an insupportable burden. I remind older people that the Church calls and expects them to continue to exercise their mission in the apostolic and missionary life. This is not only a possibility for them, but it is their duty even in this time in their life when age itself provides opportunities in some specific and basic way." Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 1988, 17. See also Pope John Paul II, *Letter to the Elderly* Obtainable from http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_01101999_elderly.html 1999.

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Letter to the President of the Second World Assembly on Ageing* 2002.

Analysis – the teaching of John Paul II in the context of key encyclicals

There is some risk of overinterpretation, and so of presenting an artificially neat and coherent picture of the emerging thinking on older people during the pontificate of John Paul II. But, exercising appropriate caution, it is possible to discern a distinct pattern supported by the two encyclicals that frame his pontificate and mediated by the two apostolic exhortations which shape their principles for practice.

Thus, his early encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (1981) lays down a principle that will shape much subsequent thought: that human dignity is inseparable from intentional human activity. It follows that human rights are interwoven with human roles: to refuse the possibility that an older person has a distinct contribution to make to human society is to deny them the dignity proper to human beings. “[I]f the solution . . . of the social question . . . must be sought in the direction of “making life more human”, then the key, namely human work, acquires fundamental and decisive importance.” (LE 3). “The *human rights that flow from work* are part of the broader context of those fundamental rights of the person.” (LE16) *That disabled people may be offered work according to their capabilities*, for this is demanded by their dignity as persons and as subjects of work.” (LE22)

The complementary principle developed in *Evangelium Vitae* is that the Gospel finds its expression in social solidarity. This principle requires us to recognise and acknowledge all marginalised groups, including the elderly, as part of our community “We cannot but think of today’s tendency for people to refuse to accept responsibility for their brothers and sisters. Symptoms of this trend include the lack of solidarity towards society’s weakest members—such as the elderly, the infirm, immigrants, children . . . “(EV8). The principle of solidarity requires us also to actively strive against the forces which introduce fissures into the social fabric and place its basic social units under strain. “A person who, because of illness, handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or lifestyle of those who are more favoured tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated. In this way a kind of “conspiracy against life” is unleashed.” (EV12) The criterion of personal dignity is replaced by the criterion of efficiency (EV23) leading to a “culture of death . . .” which sees the growing number of elderly and disabled people as intolerable and too burdensome. These people are very often isolated by their families and by society, which are organized almost exclusively on the basis of criteria of productive efficiency, according to which a hopelessly impaired life no longer has any value.” (EV64)

Pulling together the insights from the documents studied above, it is possible to identify two fundamental teachings that converge on a distinct approach to the role and needs of elderly people. There is a complementarity apparent between the teachings of *Laborem Exercens* on work and the critique of a ‘culture of death’ ruled by efficiency that points to the critically-constructive vision of older people expressed in DOP. The mediation between these principles (of individual human dignity expressed in work; and of a social solidarity expressed in cultural critique) is provided pre-eminently by the family, understood (as in *Familiaris Consortio*) as the fundamental ‘cell’ of society through which its virtues are communicated across space and time. The family unit, in turn, finds its most complete expression in the Church (as in *Christefideles laici*) in which its members, individually and collectively, find their true role and purpose.

It follows that, in John Paul II’s emergent social teaching on ageing as in other matters, the integrity of the family is the starting-point and site of struggle with secular forces opposed to its role and mission in society. This is its strength, but also its weakness. Despite the valiant efforts of the Church to protect and support the integrity of the extended family unit as a site of true love and solidarity, across the industrialized nations families continue to be dispersed, fractured and overcome with the pressures of contrary demands. As noted above, the number of older people living alone (which may be seen as one telling indicator of the levels of family breakdown) has increased dramatically since the writing of these documents. At the same time, the human resources of the Church (numbers of priests in service and active lay members attending Mass) have apparently declined markedly.¹⁶ Thus, it seems that the founding model of society as built upon family-units-in-Church is ceasing to reflect the contemporary Western experience of delocalised extended families with varying degrees of commitment to each other and to the Church.

Popes Benedict and Francis

At the time of its writing, DOP clearly provided a comprehensive and thoughtful response to the question of the role and care of older people in the Church, bringing together sociological and theological insights to provide some practical suggestions for her life and mission. But the pastoral and prophetic response of the Church faces change along with the societies in which it is embedded. On the one hand, the proportion of older people, and in particular the very old,

¹⁶ Faith Survey *Catholics in England and Wales* Obtainable from <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/catholics-england-and-wales.html> (2018).

has continued to rise; this brings a series of new challenges, such as the rise in the prevalence of dementia among members of the Church. The level of social and intergenerational isolation has increased, but at the same time new forms of digital communication and apps to assist living have, for some people, provided a substitute for the physical presence of others. In the Church, much of the residential care that had been provided by religious communities in England and Wales has had to be either abandoned or put into the hands of private companies as the number of vocations to the religious life has declined to a fraction of its previous figure.

These issues have framed the work of Popes Benedict XVI and Francis. Their contributions will be treated together, because Benedict himself has said little about the subject, but by his references to his predecessor and his presence by the side of his successor has had a clear influence upon the emerging teaching. For both, it proves difficult to separate words and actions: their words act as a commentary on their deeds. This may be partly because both speak of old age in (as it were) the 'first person' – as part of their present experience; it may also be because they are aware of the Papal role as exemplifying the wisdom of old age. This perspective is apparent in Benedict's reflections when visiting a nursing home in 2012, where he held up his immediate predecessor as an example of a Christian attitude to old age.¹⁷ In turn, Benedict's own successor referred to his presence in the Vatican as "like having grandpa home".¹⁸

Four key incidents demonstrate this relationship between witness and words, giving an indication of how Catholic social teaching is developing on this issue. First, on 28 September 2014, Popes Francis and Benedict jointly met a group of 40000 elderly in St Peter's Square. Francis singled out the role of grandparents in keeping the faith alive in places of persecution. He also stressed the importance of integration across the generations: "The future of a people necessarily supposes this encounter: the young give the strength which enable a people to move forward, while the elderly consolidate this strength by their memory and their traditional wisdom." This ideal was contrasted with the reality that, frequently, older people are discarded and effectively abandoned, for the sake of a 'balanced' economic system: "We are all called to counter this culture of poisonous waste!". Finally, Pope Francis acknowledges that in reality many older people have no family willing or able to care for them, rendering residential care necessary. But "There must never be institutions where the elderly are forgotten, hidden or neglected. . . . Homes for the elderly

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI *Visit To The Community Of Sant'egidio's Home For The Elderly "Viva Gli Anziani"* Rome Monday, 12 November 2012.

¹⁸ Pope Francis *Meeting of the Pope with the elderly*. Address of Pope Francis, Saint Peter's Square, Sunday, 28 September 2014.

should be the "lungs" of humanity in a country, in a neighborhood, in a parish; "sanctuaries" of humanity". Young people should make a point of being involved with and learning from older people.¹⁹

There is emerging here a recognition that residential care homes are an inevitability, but that if they are a place where older people are 'discarded' then everybody is impoverished. Against the culture of 'poisonous waste', his hearers must work to integrate these communities of the elderly into wider society as 'sanctuaries of humanity' in a ruthless world.

Francis has picked up and developed these themes in two addresses given in General Audiences in 2015. In the first of these, he issues a challenge to a society where "life spans have increased, but society has not 'expanded' to life!". Society is in denial: "While we are young, we are led to ignore old age, as if it were a disease to keep away from; but "In a civilization in which there is no room for the elderly or where they are thrown away because they create problems, this society carries with it the virus of death." Consequently, "It's brutal to see how the elderly are thrown away, it is a brutal thing, it is a sin! No one dares to say it openly, but it's done! There is something vile in this adherence to the throw-away culture."²⁰ This is contrasted with the tradition of the Church, in which "there is a wealth of wisdom that has always supported a culture of closeness to the elderly, a disposition of warm and supportive companionship in this final phase of life . . ." ²¹

Thus, the Church's concern with the needs of older people is reaching back into a deeper critique of culture. It is clear that here there is an echo of the critique of a 'culture of death' in EV23 as Francis attacks the throwaway culture as a whole, and the subjugation of human dignity to the pursuit of profit. For, "The elder is not an alien. We are that elder: in the near or far future, but inevitably, even if we don't think it."²² The term 'throwaway culture' itself is an echo of *Laudato si'*, promulgated the same year, although there the term

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "It's brutal to see how the elderly are thrown away, it is a brutal thing, it is a sin! No one dares to say it openly, but it's done! There is something vile in this adherence to the throw-away culture. But we are accustomed to throwing people away. We want to remove our growing fear of weakness and vulnerability; but by doing so we increase in the elderly the anxiety of being poorly tolerated and neglected. . . ." Pope Francis, *General Audience*, Saint Peter's Square Wednesday, 4 March 2015.

²¹ "[T]here is a wealth of wisdom that has always supported a culture of closeness to the elderly, a disposition of warm and supportive companionship in this final phase of life . . . The Church cannot and does not want to conform to a mentality of impatience, and much less of indifference and contempt, towards old age. We must reawaken the collective sense of gratitude, of appreciation, of hospitality, which makes the elder feel like a living part of his community." Ibid.

²² Ibid.

is not applied directly to elderly care but to an attitude to the created order which leaves it choking in waste (LS21).

If the first audience stressed the dignity of older people, the General Audience of 11th March 2015 stresses their mission and old age as a time of spiritual pilgrimage and growth: "It is not yet time to 'pull in the oars'. This period of life is different from those before, there is no doubt; we even have to somewhat 'invent it ourselves', because our societies are not ready, spiritually and morally, to appreciate the true value of this stage of life." But the prayers of the world's grandparents and older people are "a great gift for the Church" and they offer "a great infusion of wisdom for all of society, too, especially for [those who are] too busy, too occupied, too distracted".²³

Thus, there is a challenge to be met in response to an impatient and forgetful society, for "How awful is the cynicism of an elderly person who has lost the meaning of his testimony, who scorns the young and does not communicate the wisdom of life! How beautiful, however, is the encouragement an elderly person manages to pass on to a young person who is seeking the meaning of faith and of life! It is truly the mission of grandparents, the vocation of the elderly."²⁴ This is a challenge which he issued to his cardinals in a homily to mark the 25th anniversary of his priestly ordination: "The Lord tells us that our history is still open: it is open until the end; it is open with a mission. And he indicates our mission with these three imperatives: "Rise! Look! Hope!"."²⁵

Most recently, during the apostolic visit to Ireland Francis reiterates the theme that older people pass on 'the meaning of faith and life' in his celebration of an elderly couple's fifty years of married life. But he casts it in the context of the critique of a 'throwaway culture' which is emerging as a key theme of his pontificate: "The future and the past meet in the present. They – let me use the word – the "old", have wisdom... And children must listen to their wisdom, you young people ought to listen to their wisdom, and talk to them in order to keep going, because they are your roots. They are the roots and you draw from those roots in order to keep moving forward... Surely we have to acknowledge that nowadays we are not used to anything that really lasts for the whole of our lives. We are living in a "culture of the provisional", we are used to it... Perhaps what you are really asking me is something even more basic: Is there anything precious that endures at all?"²⁶

²³ Pope Francis *General Audience* Saint Peter's Square Wednesday, 11 March 2015.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Pope Francis *Homily* Pauline Chapel, Tuesday, 27 June 2017.

²⁶ Pope Francis *Visit to St Mary's Pro-Cathedral* Dublin Saturday, 25 August 2018.

Analysis – the teaching of Francis in the context of *Laudato Si'*

The most obvious link to *Laudato si'* is in the trope of a 'throwaway culture' which Francis deploys repeatedly both in his teaching about older people and in this encyclical. However, the emphasis is different in the two cases; regarding elderly people, he critiques the attitude that treats them as disposable, whereas in *Laudato si'* the critique is of human waste of natural resources. Although it may be argued that the same attitude and spiritual sickness leads to both social evils, the parallel is not drawn within the texts themselves. The point of contact between *Laudato si'* and Francis' passionate advocacy for older people lies deeper in the encyclical's social critique, in its analysis of modern technocratic society.

In *Laudato si'*, praise for the benefits that have been brought by technological progress (LS 102f) is tempered by an awareness that human beings do not necessarily use the power it brings well: "we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. We have certain superficial mechanisms, but we cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint." (LS 105). This is, at least in part, because of uncritical acceptance of the 'technological paradigm' that is an instance of a 'modern anthropocentrism' which undermines concern for the natural and human worlds alike (LS 107). Once people begin to behave with "absolute dominion", society develops a 'schizophrenia' asserting the absolute value of human beings while simultaneously seeing no special value in them (117). This is directly relevant to the ecological crisis, for "we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships . . ." (119), but at the level of human culture, it issues as a moral disorder: a 'practical relativism' that finds value in people (including the elderly) only for their functional attributes in this moment.²⁷

This short summary traces out the conceptual path between Francis' concern for the environment and his concern for the status and contribution of the elderly. On the one hand, the neglect and marginalisation of older people is an instance of the malign anthropocentrism that treats both human beings and the natural world as objects, resources to be exploited for personal gain and discarded,

²⁷ "The culture of relativism is the same disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects, imposing forced labour on them or enslaving them to pay their debts. The same kind of thinking leads to the sexual exploitation of children and abandonment of the elderly who no longer serve our interests . . . This same "use and throw away" logic generates so much waste, because of the disordered desire to consume more than what is really necessary. . ." (LS123).

rather than as gifts to be cherished and enriched by. On the other, it may be that the remedy to a throwaway culture of practical relativism may lie in listening to and valuing the insights of those whose memory and experience delivers them from the tyranny of an exclusive focus on the here-and-now, the 'culture of the provisional'. This becomes clearer in the discussion of 'cultural ecology'. In order to renew our relationship with the environment, we need to rediscover history, culture and the specificity of each locality: the treasures which the older generation have to offer.²⁸

In this brief summary of some key themes in the thinking of Francis in relation to the elderly, it is possible to discern structural features which parallel the thought of John Paul II. There is a challenge to older people themselves; a critique of the culture and society which sees old age as a problem; and a mediation between the individual and society at large through intermediate social structures. There is some difference in emphasis, which is most clear in their social critique. For John Paul II, the source of social problems was a materialism that reduced all human values to 'efficiency' and isolated those who were perceived to have nothing to contribute; for Francis, the recurrent themes in *Laudato si'* relate to the 'technological paradigm', and the way in which that reduces all value to an object's instrumental significance here and now, without social or historical context. Consequently, where John Paul II advocates the reintegration of older people into family and Church as contexts in which they may play a useful part, Francis imagines a 'cultural ecology' of the local and particular in which the historical and cultural richness of old age may be deployed to enrich local communities. However, it is possible to overplay these differences of emphasis, which surely do not reflect real differences of opinion so much as responses to a changing social context.

Conspectus – towards an integrated theology of the role and needs of the elderly

There is a danger of overinterpreting the material when attempting a conspectus of this sort, but by combining the themes and emphases

²⁸ “. . . there is a need to incorporate the history, culture and architecture of each place, thus preserving its original identity . . . for greater attention to local cultures when studying environmental problems, favouring a dialogue between scientific-technical language and the language of the people. Culture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment.” (143)
 “. . . the development of a social group presupposes an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people *from within their proper culture.*” (144).

arising from the pontificates of the last three popes in the light of some principles from their key encyclicals, it is possible to discern the makings of an integrated theology of older people. As noted above, this seems to have three facets: a consideration of the nature of old age; a critique of the broader society in which the elderly are marginalized; and a consideration of mediating structures and institutions.

- (1) **The personhood and vocation of older people.** The lack of care for older people is related to their perceived uselessness. While this is itself a judgement on the hegemony of a 'technological paradigm' that values objects and individuals only when it sees a function for them, there is a more fundamental sense in which human dignity and the vocation to work are related. This is the core insight of *Laborem exercens* which informs and is worked out in the detailed analysis of the role of older people in the Church, in *The Dignity of Older People*. In DOP and in the thinking of the Popes, the distinctive contribution of older people is related to the duration and depth of their engagement with God and those around them: older people have unique riches and insights. However, if older people are to be prized for their spiritual insight, wisdom and experience, they are also also challenged to resist the temptations of cynicism and discover their proper vocation at each stage in life (see *Christefideles Laici* 17). This is a new area of spiritual exploration for the Church, casting older people in the role of a spiritual vanguard.
- (2) **Family, culture and society.** Both John Paul II and Francis assert the centrality of the family as a fundamental unit of wider society, and of the role of older people as finding primary expression in this context. But 'family' is to be understood extensively and in an open sense: the role of older people in handing on hope and permanence extends to society as a whole (e.g. LS 21); and conversely, the whole of society has 'family' responsibilities to elderly people who have been marginalized or are in need of care (EV 64, 90). These webs of mutual responsibility are best expressed in small-scale institutions, as older people are essential to healthy and diverse local societies (LS 143). Even residential homes can be 'the lungs of humanity' where younger people can learn human values and confront ageing without denial: "The elder is not an alien. We are that elder: in the near or far future, but inevitably, even if we don't think it."²⁹

²⁹ Pope Francis *General Audience* Saint Peter's Square Wednesday, 4 March 2015 2015.

- (3) **The culture of death and the 'throwaway culture'**. As is the case with abortion or the treatment of the disabled, where the elderly are marginalized or mistreated we encounter a 'conspiracy against life' (EV 23, 64) and the worst excesses of the 'throwaway culture' (LS 122, 123) against which the Church is called to struggle. In this respect also, older people can be considered to be in the vanguard: their experiences and marginalization draw attention to the cognitive and moral deficiencies of materialist and functionalist cultures: the difficulty that our culture has in finding a place for the elderly is reproduced in its treatment of the poor, migrants, the disabled and any other group that fails to fit the pattern of a self-reliant consumer.

Conclusions. The Church's witness and older people

To conclude, it can be said that a reflection on the teachings of the three most recent popes, contextualised and interpreted in the light of some key encyclicals, yields a coherent account of the intended role and position of older people in society, along with a coherent vision of the sort of society that would make such an account possible. It is undergirded by fundamental doctrines of the value and purpose of each individual, the role of the family and the goodness of creation that permeate the whole of Catholic Social Teaching and that form the leading edge of the current struggle for a culture informed by Catholic values (see CSDC, 2004). This leads to the practical question: how might this teaching inform the Church's ministry and witness in the public square?

The analysis above suggests that, in order to challenge a dominant rhetoric of marginalization, a critique of social and cultural values needs to be joined to a challenge to older people. Regarding the critique, a society governed by the 'technological paradigm' will undervalue those who do not make a measurable and definable contribution to the common good. As noted in *Laudato si'*, such a society tends to uniformity and is intolerant of diversity: one consequence is that departures from its normative understanding of the ideal human being will be treated as problems to be corrected. It will value highly attempts to find a technological solution to practical problems (such as loss of mobility in old age); and will tend to ignore more profound 'problems' that are resistant to 'cures' or technical responses (such as the universal experience of ageing itself). This leads to the 'denial' identified by Pope Francis. Consequently, the Church's challenge to the marginalisation of elderly people must encompass a challenge to this narrow view of value based upon an individual's function and usefulness.

However, as well as this challenge to the scale of values shaping society as a whole, there needs to be a resistance to their 'internalisation' of the values system. This is the basis of the challenge presented by both John Paul II and Francis to older people. The current dominant images of old age in the UK are most often of empty hedonism (perpetual cruising around the Mediterranean) or of palliative care (keeping the frail elderly comfortable until they die). Even the current concern with 'healthy ageing' focusses exclusively on the health and wellbeing of the individual. This relegates older people to the status of passive consumers of resources and lays the groundwork for a rhetoric of old age as a 'burden' for individuals and society. As well as disempowering older people, it drowns out the abundant literature that shows the importance of grandparents in (for example) providing affordable and socially-beneficial childcare, or in maintaining the civic values of communities (Cook 2011).

Mediating the two foci of resistance, to the devaluing of the contribution of older people by society and its internalisation by older people themselves, there is a focal role for the Church as modelling a different vision of society. This brings us back to *The Dignity of Older People* and its lengthy analysis of the roles that older people should be adopting within the Church community.

There is a good argument to be made that a vision for the elderly should be at the centre of the Church's pastoral mission as the 'cutting edge' for its prophetic witness, at least in the UK. This is because traditional foci for this witness such as the abortion debate and the rights of workers have become arguably less relevant in the postindustrial western world, as birth rates and employment in mass industries have both declined; whereas the place of older people in society becomes an increasingly prominent issue. Although some are enjoying unprecedented economic and political power, the bulk of older people will at some point find themselves disempowered, marginalised and silenced as they are consigned to the 'fourth age' of dependency and need.³⁰ As governments across the developed world devote increasing attention and resources to trying to 'cope with' the rising numbers and needs of older people, there is an opportunity for the Church to shift the terms of the conversation to consider the place of older people in society as a whole.

At this point in the policy and planning process, an energetic and coherent contribution from the Bishop's Council or its representatives has a real chance of shifting the terms of the debate away from a narrow focus on pragmatic concerns and towards a broader consideration of human value and the way in which it is preserved or

³⁰ Higgs, P and Gilleard, C. *Rethinking Old Age: Theorising the Fourth Age* (London: Palgrave 2015).

distorted by the assumptions and structures of contemporary society. There is a good case to be made that an ageing society is only a 'problem' for postindustrial societies such as the UK because the psychological, moral and spiritual impoverishment of their values-system makes us reluctant or unable to respond to each other with generosity and positive regard. In contrast to this impoverishment, the Church's emergent social teaching on the role and needs of the elderly stands out for its richness and profound insight. It is a good time to let it be more widely known.

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