

LIFE IN OLD AGE AND AT TIMES OF SUFFERING

FROM THE GOSPEL OF LIFE (EVANGELIUM VITAE), 46 & 47

WITH REGARD TO THE LAST MOMENTS OF LIFE TOO, IT WOULD be anachronistic to expect biblical revelation to make express reference to present-day issues concerning respect for elderly and sick persons, or to condemn explicitly attempts to hasten their end by force. The cultural and religious context of the Bible is in no way touched by such temptations; indeed, in that context the wisdom and experience of the elderly are recognized as a unique source of enrichment for the family and for society.

Old age is characterized by dignity and surrounded with reverence (cf. 2 Mac 6:23). The just man does not seek to be delivered from old age and its burden; on the contrary his prayer is this: “You, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth...so even to old age and grey hairs, O God, do not forsake me, till I proclaim your might to all the generations to come” (Ps 71:5, 18). The ideal of the Messianic age is presented as a time when “no more shall there be...an old man who does not fill out his days” (Is 65:20).

In old age, how should one face the inevitable decline of life? How should one act in the face of death? The believer knows that his life is in the hands of God: “You, O Lord, hold my lot” (cf. Ps 16:5), and he accepts from God the need to die: “This is the decree from the Lord for all flesh, and how can you reject the good pleasure of the Most High?” (Sir 41:3-4). Man is not the master of life, nor is he the master of death. In life and in death, he has to entrust himself completely to the “good pleasure of the Most High,” to his loving plan.

In moments of sickness too, man is called to have the same trust in the Lord and to renew his fundamental faith in the One who “heals all your diseases” (cf. Ps 103:3). When every hope of good health seems to fade before a person’s eyes—so as to make him cry out: “My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass” (Ps 102:11)—even then the believer is sustained by an unshakable faith in God’s life-giving power. Illness does not drive such a person to despair and to seek death, but makes him cry out in hope: “I kept my faith, even when I said, ‘I am greatly

afflicted” (Ps 116:10); “O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, you have brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the pit” (Ps 30:2-3).

The mission of Jesus, with the many healings he performed, shows God’s great concern even for man’s bodily life. Jesus, as “the physician of the body and of the spirit,”¹ was sent by the Father to proclaim the good news to the poor and to heal the brokenhearted (cf. Lk 4:18; Is 61:1). Later, when he sends his disciples into the world, he gives them a mission, a mission in which healing the sick goes hand in hand with the proclamation of the Gospel: “And preach as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons” (Mt 10:7-8; cf. Mk 6:13; 16:18).

Certainly the life of the body in its earthly state is not an absolute good for the believer, especially as he may be asked to give up his life for a greater good. As Jesus says: “Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mk 8:35). The New Testament gives many different examples of this. Jesus does not hesitate to sacrifice himself and he freely makes of his life an offering to the Father (cf. Jn 10:17) and to those who belong to him (cf. Jn 10:15). The death of John the Baptist, precursor of the Saviour, also testifies that earthly existence is not an absolute good; what is more important is remaining faithful to the word of the Lord even at the risk of one’s life (cf. Mk 6:17-29). Stephen, losing his earthly life because of his faithful witness to the Lord’s Resurrection, follows in the Master’s footsteps and meets those who are stoning him with words of forgiveness (cf. Acts 7:59-60), thus becoming the first of a countless host of martyrs whom the Church has venerated since the very beginning.

No one, however, can arbitrarily choose whether to live or die; the absolute master of such a decision is the Creator alone, in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). ■

1 Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 7, 2: *Patres Apostolici*, ed. F.X. Funk, II, 82.



Pope St. John Paul II on his Encyclical *The Gospel of Life* (1995): “...[it] is meant to be a precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability, and at the same time, a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person in the name of God: respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life! Only in this direction will you find justice, development, true freedom, peace and happiness!”