

Ideas of religious gerontology based on the *Letter of his holiness Pope John Paul II to the elderly*

Abstract:

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate the idea of religious gerontology in the light of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is the base for “Letter of his holiness Pope John Paul II to the elderly” (1999). Such a specified research perspective tends to show understanding of old age and the place of the elderly within that tradition as well as to work out the efficacy of the religious view in current discussions on matters of old age. This research perspective also intends to provide help for critical analysis of all stereotypes which depreciate the greatness of old age in postmodern societies. The entire reflection comprises the following elements: the temporal and historical plane of human existence, human dignity, talents and hopes of the elderly, practical and eschatological implications of the Judeo-Christian religious gerontology.

Keywords:

religious gerontology; human dignity and talents of the elderly; respect towards the elderly; destination of man.

Religious gerontology is one of the new gerontological subdisciplines, which makes religion the subject of gerontology or makes old age the subject of research on religion. Its research subject, in general, covers relations between religion and the elderly, an old person's life and practice of religion. In a more detailed approach, religious gerontology considers, among other things, how the elderly practice their faith, particularly with regard to their health and happiness. It will also look at how the elderly might use their religion as a resource to help them to deal with the limitations placed in them by their advancing years. To help us to clarify the research into religions influence on the elderly, it is necessary to nar-

row our research to the view inspired by a particular religious tradition. Therefore, the aim of these reflections is to present the idea of religious gerontology in the light of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is the base for *Letter of his holiness Pope John Paul II to the elderly* (1999). Such a specified research perspective tends to show understanding of old age and the place of the elderly within that tradition as well as to work out the efficacy of the religious view in current discussions on matters of old age. The entire reflection comprises the following elements: the temporal and historical plane of human existence (1), human dignity, talents and hopes of the elderly (2), practical implications of respects towards the elderly (3) and eschatological implications of religious gerontology (4).

1. Temporal and historical plane of human existence

Birth and death are the points which determine the borderline of human life. The earthly existence of humans is bounded by those events: “Man is immersed in time; he is born, lives and dies within time. Birth establishes one date, the first of his life, and death another, the last: the «alpha» and the «omega», the beginning and end of his history on earth. The Christian tradition has emphasized this by inscribing these two letters of the Greek alphabet on tombstones” (no. 2). The Biblical concept of the human life cycle consists of four stages: (1) childhood – in God’s intention is a time of growth; (2) youth – the stage of intensive preparation for taking up serious life tasks; (3) maturity – the stage of creativity based upon previously gathered resources, and (4) old age – the time for reflecting on and enjoying the rewards of our labours, the time for rest and reflection.

The truth about the temporality of human existence is built upon a linear idea of time, as expressed in the Judeo-Christian tradition. That truth is probably appreciated most particularly by elderly people who become increasingly aware of the temporal nature of their humanity. At a certain moment, each human recognizes the truth about the temporality of human existence. That existence within the time is a source of happiness, although in the course of time it is not often accompanied by too much health. However, awareness of the fact that the end of life is near, can often cause fear and anxiety. Those distressing feelings are mitigated if the person is able to look beyond this earthly existence with eternal perspective – human purpose.

The Pope in reflecting on the temporality of human existence in a historical context stressed that the personal history of a human individual is concurrent with the world history. Therefore, thorough life assessment made in old age should take into consideration the influence that a particular historical

context has on the life of each person. Referring to the painful events of 20th century history, (connected particularly with two world wars and totalitarian regimes which tried to destroy human dignity), the Pope calls to mind several positive advances that have taken place during the past century: “There has been a growing consciousness – albeit amid numerous inconsistencies, especially where respect for the life of each human being is concerned – of universal human rights, proclaimed in solemn and binding international declarations. Moreover, there has been a continuing development of a sense of the right of peoples to self-government in the context of national and international relations, inspired by an appreciation of cultural identity together with respect of minorities. The fall of totalitarian systems, like those of Eastern Europe, has led to growth in the universal perception of the value of democracy and of the free market, although the great challenge of uniting freedom and social justice still remains” (no. 4).

Old age is always understood in a particular temporal and historical context. The Pope’s reflections on 20th century history, which is also the time of his personal life history, while not ignoring the evil, appreciated the signs of God’s activity in human history: “There are many reasons, then, for giving thanks to God. All things considered, these final years of our century present immense potential for peace and progress. From the very adversities which our generation has experienced there comes a light which can brighten the years of our old age. Here we see the confirmation of a principle central to the Christian faith: «Tribulations not only do not destroy hope; they are its foundation»” (no. 4). The Pope invites us to make an assessment of our life, including painful and difficult matters in our personal history and also based on the world history, to discover that even in everyday happenings God also is present and always watches over us for our sake. That assessment should re-invigorate our practice of our faith and lead us to taking up new charitable tasks within our community.

2. Dignity of the elderly

In the reflection on the dignity of the elderly, the Pope focuses in his letter, not so much on ontological dignity which belongs to all humans by virtue of their existence as humans, but on dynamic dignity – recognized theologically as dignity of human due to their creation in the image and likeness of God. A man is a human, but at the same time, to become fully human, his humanity must be developed. Dynamic dignity is acquired by humans and it is realized when a man does not withdraw into himself but enters into relations with other humans.

Dynamic personal dignity grows when a man lives “together with” and “for” others, when he becomes a gift for others. The Pope writes in the letter: “At the same time however man is set apart from all other realities around him, precisely because he is a person. Made in the image and likeness of God, he is conscious and responsible” (no. 5).

From the perspective of the elderly, it becomes obvious that realization of personal dignity is connected with the toil of development – taking up important and responsible life tasks and making choices. It is frequently connected with suffering, pain, loneliness, illness or disability. It may be commonly expressed with words: to live in dignity; to respect the dignity of other humans; to suffer illness with dignity; to deal with one’s pain and suffering with dignity and to accept with dignity things which are difficult and painful but, at the same time, impossible to change. All of this leads to the creation of full and mature humanity.

Encouragement to live the „twilight years” creatively expressed more specifically when John Paul II speaks about talents. What is characteristic for his religious gerontology is underlining the good within each person, which could be shared with others. In the elderly, the Pope sees the gifts and talents which people have acquired during their life. In his teaching, he highlights three domains of human activity in which the talents and predispositions are actualized. These three domains are: faith, life experience and historical wisdom. As regarding the faith, the elderly are, according to John Paul II, the witnesses of a faith tradition; as regarding life experience – “living encyclopedias of wisdom” (no. 12); and as regarding the historical wisdom – “the guardians of our collective memory” (no. 10).

Talent relating to the faith is connected with knowledge about religious traditions passed on from generation to generation and about giving witness to one’s faith. John Paul II calls the elderly “the living encyclopedias of wisdom”. Tens of years of their lives have given them precious experience, practical and theoretical knowledge as well as interpersonal skills. The mature person is “a guardian of collective memory”, according to the Pope, who bears within himself memories of times which are otherwise, now, only found in history books. These are memories of the events with great impact on the present time that enrich our collective memory.

Understanding of these talents by the elderly help to build up a mature and dynamic dignity and promote a positive image of old age.

3. Respect towards the elderly

Religious gerontology based upon a particular religious tradition, explains the process of ageing within the perspective of the normative concept of the specified faith practice, and the formation of the person is based upon these norms. The Pope, referring to Judeo-Christian tradition, underlines the value of respect and honour towards the elderly in relation to the fourth commandment of the Decalogue: "The full and consistent application of this commandment has not only been a source of the love of children for their parents, but it has also forged the strong link which exists between the generations. Where this commandment is accepted and faithfully observed, there is little danger that older people will be regarded as a useless and troublesome burden" (no 11). Religious motivation, showing respect, is connected with fulfillment of particular duties for the sake of the elderly: "Honouring older people involves a threefold duty: welcoming them, helping them and making good use of their qualities. In many places this happens almost spontaneously, as the result of long-standing custom" (no. 12). It is necessary that also, in the more economically advanced nations, this kind of honouring of older people should be realized, "to ensure that they can grow old with dignity, without having to fear that they will end up no longer counting for anything" (no. 12).

The Pope presents a very realistic approach regarding honour towards parents. A perfect solution is for an elderly person to remain within the family which can, thus, ensure that there is efficient social support, adequate to the needs of their advancing years and deteriorating health. There do occur, however, situations where the elderly family member can no longer be adequately cared for at home and it may then become necessary for the family to find suitable residential accommodation (no. 13).

By serving the elderly, the Christian community is not only the giver but also the beneficiary, in that it receives the benefit of the talents of the elderly, by the sharing of which the elderly person is still able to make a real and valuable contribution to the social life of the community. "There are many other areas where the elderly can make a beneficial contribution. The Spirit acts as and where he wills, and quite frequently he employs human means which seem of little account in the eyes of the world. How many people find understanding and comfort from elderly people who may be lonely or ill and yet are able to instill courage by their loving advice, their silent prayers, or their witness of suffering borne with patient acceptance! At the very time when their physical energies and their level of activity are decreasing, these brothers and sisters of ours become all the more precious in the mysterious plan of Providence" (no. 13).

4. Human purpose

Reflection on old age in a religious perspective always opens a man to transcendence. In the Judeo-Christian tradition it is an opening to eternal life with the prospect of resurrection. As it has been stated about the temporal condition of human existence, religious gerontology, based upon the Judeo-Christian tradition does not hide the truth about the end of life – about death, but interprets it in eternity perspective. “However rationally comprehensible death may be, from a biological standpoint, it is not possible to experience it as something «natural». This would contradict man’s deepest instincts. (...) «It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence becomes most acute. Not only is man tormented by pain and by the advancing deterioration of his body, but even more so by a dread of perpetual extinction». This anguish would indeed be inconsolable, were death complete destruction, the end of everything. Death thus forces men and women to ask themselves fundamental questions about the meaning of life itself. What is on the other side of the shadowy wall of death? Does death represent the definitive end of life or does something lie beyond it?” (no. 14).

Thoughts of eternity and belief in resurrection are not a form of “cheap comfort” or encouragement to escape into irrational future. Belief in the resurrection of the body brightens up the mysteries of death. Faith, and an attitude of trust towards God, does not mean resignation or passive waiting. The Pope underlines clearly: “Most commendable then are all 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. In this way the capacity to enjoy life as God’s primordial gift is preserved and increased. Such a capacity to enjoy life in no way conflicts with that desire for eternity which grows within people of deep spiritual experience, as the lives of the saints bear witness” (no. 16).

Old age is the time when one is the most inclined to think about eternity. Faith brightens up the mystery of death and shines on old age with its light. In the conclusion of his letter to the elderly, John Paul II makes a very personal confession relating to awaiting death: “I find great peace in thinking of the time when the Lord will call me: from life to life! And so I often find myself saying, with no trace of melancholy, a prayer recited by priests after the celebration of the Eucharist: *In hora mortis meae voca me, et iube me venire ad te* – at the hour of my death, call me and bid me come to you. This is the prayer of Christian hope, which in no way detracts from the joy of the present, while entrusting the future to God’s gracious and loving care” (no. 17).

To conclude, it has to be stated that the idea of religious gerontology from the point of view of the Judeo-Christian tradition, proposed by John Paul II, promotes a positive image of old age. For the Pope, to think about old age is to focus on a human made in God's image from conception to death, in His image and likeness; it is also to emphasize that every moment of human existence should be lived fully and in dignity. People of all ages (both young and old), who are considering taking up research projects dealing with ageing, might well consider focusing more on these positive aspects of ageing. The Pope's reflection provides arguments for critical analysis of all stereotypes which depreciate the greatness of old age in post modern societies.

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