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## A BLESSING TO THE WORLD, A TREASURE FOR THE CHURCH (1)

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On the occasion of the International Year of Older Persons, and especially for the National Day on May 20, I am happy to pass on to you the message of the Catholic Organisation for Life and Family.

### WELCOMING ALL AGES

The United Nations General Assembly has designated 1999 as the Year of Older Persons. This special year is an occasion to promote with our brothers and sisters throughout the world *a society that is welcoming to people of all ages*. It is also a chance to reflect on some of the challenges, contributions and possibilities for seniors in our families, Church and society.

### SHADOWS AND LIGHT

Seniors are as diverse as other generations. While some are just beginning to come to terms with growing old, others are frail and ill. Those who have retired early may be caring for elderly parents as well as trying to support their own children's young families. Some seniors are financially comfortable; others, especially women, are poor. For many, this time of life is rich in new human discoveries and relationships. For others, it is an emotional desert and social ghetto. Medical progress has steadily pushed back the age of dependency. Despite the fragility of life, despite the successive losses of loved ones, despite life's upheavals, most people reach the senior years in good health, and many remain independent, healthy, active and lucid until the end of their lives.

### IRREPLACEABLE ROLE

For some, however, the later years usher in a host of problems. The isolation caused by the loss of friend and the estrangement of loved ones may weigh heavily indeed. Forced by an aging body to give up many of the things they hold dear, some seniors lose the will to live. After working for so long to raise a family and provide for the future, older people at times feel that they are no longer of use to anyone. For some, abuse and poverty make life even more unbearable. By their *active presence* at the heart of today's families and communities in so many ways, seniors play an essential role. Notwithstanding certain difficulties and even hardships, this time of life can be very rewarding and an occasion for gratitude.

### A TREASURE

*Brothers and sisters of the older generations, you are a treasure for the Church, you are a blessing for the world. You provide comfort to young parents countless times. You know how best to introduce children to the history of your families and your heritage, to the traditions of your people, and to the world of faith. When faced with problems, young people often find it easier to approach you than their own parents. For your sons and daughters you are the primary support in times of difficulty. Your advice and active involvement is a valued contribution to the groups and projects of ecclesial and civil life.*

## BRIDGING THE GENERATIONS

Grandparents are uniquely placed to build bridges between the generations, to inspire trust and to instill values. They were once parents themselves, and they intimately understand the importance of supporting young families. They remember all too well how hard it is to build a successful family and to maintain a centre of peace and mutual assistance in the midst of an overburdened schedule. Grandparents subscribe to a joyful and dynamic vision of life; they see it as a thread connecting the family's past to the present. Grandparents instinctively keep their hearts open and memories alive, and they seize the right moment to provide words of wisdom, encouragement and affection to their loved ones.

## THE FAMILY'S MEMORY

A grandfather and grandmother together form the collective memory of a family. They carry with them stories of ancestors, boxes of souvenirs, old photographs, keepsakes that have weathered time and sometimes great distances, favourite recipes and old songs, family traditions, and the family's intellectual, social and spiritual values. They are the family's anchor in times of storm and the living link with long-departed cousins, uncles, great aunts, and great-grandparents. For children, having attentive and kindly grandparents close at hand to teach them family traditions and rituals and to recount the stories of ancestors is a wonderful resource. Grandparents always have time to spend with the young and the not-so-young, time to celebrate minor milestones, and time to listen, console and cajole.

## A BLESSING FOR THE WORLD

Very often the careers of young working parents force the family to move away from their roots. Grandparents feel cut off from their loved ones and regret the loss of their traditional role within the family. The extended family structure may splinter and break. But feelings of isolation and uselessness can be overcome. Having time to fill is an opportunity to serve and invest in the community. Many seniors participate in a variety of group activities, which may be organized or informal, depending on where they live. Some seniors volunteer to work with various support groups, others make articles to help out young families, such as socks, mittens and hats; others visit the disadvantaged or prepare food for shut-ins; others donate skills from their careers (e.g., accounting, home repair, teaching); others work in family drop-in centres to help young mothers in need of a break; and still others help children with their homework. In fact, there is an endless variety of worthwhile causes desperate for volunteers willing to give of their time to help the community.

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