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INTER-CONGREGATIONAL MESSAGE

***Camillian Religious – Daughters of St. Camillus –
Sister Ministers of the Sick of St. Camillus (Camillian Sisters)***

14 July 2015
Liturgical Feast Day of St. Camillus de Lellis
401 years after his death

TO OUR ELDERLY AND SICK RELIGIOUS SISTERS AND BROTHERS

Ageing with dignity and elegance: an ethical imperative and a personal choice

‘My son, take care of your father when he grows old; give him no cause for worry as long as he lives. Be sympathetic even if his mind fails him; don’t look down on him just because you are strong and healthy. The Lord will not forget your kindness and will help you’ (Sir 3, 12-14a).

In the year dedicated to consecrated life we are invited to ‘look to the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion, serving like the Samaritan with compassion and embracing the future with hope’. In this message we express our gratitude to those who have built the *heroic* history of our Order and our religious Congregations – a charismatic history that has traversed four centuries and which is a call to respond to the multiple calls that we have in front of us – so as not to forget our elderly and sick religious brothers and sisters today.

Differently from Asian culture where elderly people are still seen as being culturally relevant and socially respected as the memory and the embodied wisdom of the community (cf. in Japan the day dedicated to the elderly is celebrated as a national holiday), in our Western culture the elderly are not highly regarded. The emphasis is increasingly placed on their disabilities and limitations, on the costs and expenditure that are needed for their care at the level of health-care policies, and on the deterioration of the system of pensions. Increasingly less emphasis is placed on their rich life histories, on the experience and human wisdom of which they are the custodians. At the basis of this reductive vision of the human person, who is defined solely for what he or she ‘produces and not for what he or she is’, a great question is located: ageing constitutes a stage in life that is characterised by an existential crisis that has three dimensions: an identity crisis (with self loss); a crisis of autonomy (with an increasing dependence on others); and a crisis of belonging (an uprooting from the elderly person’s environment and a move towards an old people’s home).

We need to retrieve, through a resilient approach, the meaning of this *crisis* that deeply afflicts *elderly people*, above all in our society which is by now defined as a *throwaway civilisation* and one with programmed expiry dates!

Until not so long ago, reference was made simply to *old age*. Today the scientific literature on ageing detects three categories of elderly people: a) *young* elderly people between the ages of 65 and 75; b) elderly people in the true sense of the term between the ages of 75 and 85; and c) very elderly people, those who are over the age of 85, who in the near future, according to researchers in this field, will increasingly grow in numbers. At the time of St. Camillus people spoke a great deal about *the poor and the sick*, whereas the category of *elderly people* was almost never mentioned in his writings! Certainly there were elderly people during that epoch. Today, however, together with the poor and the sick we also have the great task of looking after the elderly who need special care and concern, above all if they have chronic degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. The ageing of the population is a very recent phenomenon in human history. In developed countries the number of paediatric hospitals has decreased in a significant way and in many cases they have even disappeared, but in the other direction nursing homes and/or old people's homes have multiplied, becoming a real form of remunerative business within the panorama of the world of health and health care.

Today we live in a society that is called 'post-modern'; reference is made to 'post-industrial', 'post-Christian' and even 'post-human' civilisation! Yes! 'Post-humanism' is an ideological movement which in proclaiming the banishing of death from the life of man – which is seen together with ageing as an *illness* to which a remedy must be found and not as a dimension of our existence – offers us the 'gift of immortality' on earth.

But humanity has still not managed to uphold and apply the fundamental rights of man which were proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948 at the end of the Second World War (1939-1945) and which guarantee the possibility of living with dignity (freedom of thought and of conscience, education, health, housing, work, etc.). And now we are already involved in this anthropological vision according to which a human being is something that has to be gone beyond and superseded. Naturally enough, we have before us an ideology which, just as it has tried to deny our finitude, is now also trying to deny our human condition. Age cannot be seen as a pathological process or worse as a tragic destiny upon which we cannot intervene except through passive acceptance!

We have to discover how it is possible to grow old with grace, wisdom, serenity and aesthetic elegance. This is the horizon of the analysis that we offer in this message.

Living our 'Sunday of Life' with Zeal and Dignity!

The time of life experienced as *Κρόνος* is very well documented today by the scientific knowledge of geriatrics and gerontology. But the pathway of obscurity and shadows which the *Κρόνος* brings about is documented above all: changes and a drastic loss of energy, of strength, of ability, of lucidity, of will and of awareness of our finitude. To accept the time of life as a *Καιρός*, as a journey of light, while one lives in *Κρόνος*, is an option for an old age of dignity and good health.

Elderly people cannot live in a passive way in line with the style of *Κρόνος* which sees future aging as an unforgiving destiny, with the reduction of strength, energy and lucidity and with the growth of dependence on others. An elderly person needs to expand himself or herself in a creative way. He or she is going through a stage of life of existential wisdom and can still contribute in an active way to the life of the community and society. Ageing with dignity and elegance means living a choice, a challenge, an objective and a real mission that begins with ourselves, before proclaiming it to other people.

We would like to quote *Dom Aloisio Lorscheider* (a Franciscan religious), a Brazilian Cardinal, who a few days before his death (23 December 2007), which took place at the age of eighty-three, gave a paper on 'Ageing with Wisdom' to his elderly Franciscan religious brothers in the same religious house to which he retired in silence during the last years of his life. He shared his personal experience and spoke about old age as the 'Sunday of life'. This was a fine image, one used by a shepherd who knows his sheep and recognises that on *Sunday*, being, socialising and celebrating or playing, acquire priority over work, over doing, over the things and the stress of our normal days!

We should mediate on the message of this 'wise and respectable old man' who tells us about his personal experience as an elderly person.

1. *Being careful not to lose our identity.* We are dignified people and we continue to be such even when we grow old. Ageing is not a misfortune of destiny: we can choose how to grow old without forgoing our capacities and our gifts of being and acting. The ideal is for death, at the moment of leaving this world (dying), to find us still fully alive and not living only awaiting death, ceding passively to boredom and pessimism. We have to *enjoy* every moment, taking all the juice out of life.

2. *A time of contemplation.* Old age can also be a time of contemplation and enchantment. We register many events, situations and meetings throughout our lives, including rather sad events, inside us. We should contemplate in a special way the reality and the truth of our faith. If we do this, time will seem short because there are many things that have to be explored in a contemplative way inside us.

3. *A time of silence.* Old age is also a time of silence. St. Teresa d'Avila always laid emphasis on composure and above all on *interior silence*. When we were younger, because of our ages, we were more troubled and noisy. A little more advanced in years and we become calmer and more reflective. We prefer more silent places, far from the infernal noise of the city, of the traffic and of the factories. Listening to music can be an important advance.

4. *A time of despoliation and detachment.* We gradually despoil ourselves of many vanities, superficialities, rancour, complaints and sufferings. This is the time of our personal *Kenosis*, of forgiveness and of the capacity to live in peace. With the passing of the years, we run the risk of becoming like blocks of granite: hard, impermeable and immutable. We believe that we have nothing to learn from the young and we close ourselves up within ourselves. How are our ideas, our tastes, and the people who are our friends? We have to transform this block of granite into a block of crystal.

5. *A time of prayer.* Prayer is the special mission of elderly people. There is more time available. If we do not pray, our old age loses much of its meaning. Old age is a special moment when the spiritual dimension should be cultivated more intensely. And it is a good idea to become rejuvenated in our prayer. Prayer rejuvenates the heart. St. Paul reminds us that 'even though our physical being is gradually decaying, yet our spiritual being is renewed day after day' (2 Cor 4:16). Prayer is also a way by which to move out of loneliness, which is the greatest threat of our epoch. It links us up again with other people and with God, strengthening our sense of belonging. A mysterious force, but one that works.

6. *A time of dominion over ourselves.* How do we behave? Like impatient and selfish elderly people, murmurers, or as elderly people with patient, tolerant and detached hearts? We need to create within ourselves a new outlook with greater serenity as regards the lives that we have lived. This means controlling our irritations so as to cultivate joy at being still alive and being able to contribute something meaningful to life.

7. *A time to cultivate and bear witness to gratitude.* Only those who cultivate humility and embrace their own human conditions of vulnerability are able to give thanks! The arrogant and the self-sufficient, convinced that they are enough for themselves, do not feel the need for God. We are grateful to God for

the very many wonderful opportunities for growth that we have had throughout our lives. More than a *lament*, we are challenged to cultivate an attitude involving the *appreciation of life!* We are invited to express our gratitude to God for the very many people who have supported us during our whole lives.

Living Ageing as a Gift and Witness in a Community

Witness to faithfulness to one's vocation

Faithfulness to the Camillian vocation is without doubt the most important and eloquent testimony to its value. It narrates a rich history of commitment, of giving, of challenges, of joys and of difficulties lived in Christ with the objective of remaining faithful to him and to suffering and needy humanity. Elderly men and women religious can repeat with the apostle: 'Who, then, can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble do it, or hardship or persecution or hunger or danger or death? No, in all these things we have complete victory, through him who loved us' (Rom 8:35-39).

Faithfulness to one's vocation is effective witness for the Church and for the world. It is a scent pleasing to the Lord, offered up to him in sacrifice (cf. Ez 29:18; Phil 4:18). Young and old vocations today need this witness to faithfulness which encourages them on their journey and helps them never to get lost in difficulties.

Let us remember the following words of John Paul II: 'while the human spirit has some part in the process of bodily ageing, in some way it remains ever young if it is constantly turned towards eternity. While they tend to need physical assistance, it is equally true that in their old age the elderly are able to offer guidance and support to young people as they face the future and prepare to set out along life's paths.'¹

Witness to joy

True joy has its roots in Christ and his resurrection. Elderly men and women religious can repeat: 'We have believed in the love God has for us' (1 Jn 4:16). This is the existential joy of those who during their lives have looked for the will of God and His greater glory. It is the joy of those who 'have fought the good fight' (2 Tm 4:7) and have remained faithful despite the trials and the difficulties. It is the joy of those who have adhered to the project of God in their lives and can happily await the 'crown of glory' in eternity. Paschal joy must be visible in the faces of men and women religious and it must irradiate their communities and the surrounding world. This is a strong proclaiming of vocation that attracts and wins over the young people of today.

Living conformation to Christ in old age and illness

Old age is often connected with illness, A time of illness is not a time separated from expression of the charism. Indeed, it is a privileged time to live the charism in its fullness.

As regards the trials and tribulations that at time advanced age involves, St. John Paul II, when addressing the elderly, wrote: 'In the tribulations of old age lies your itinerary of pain, and you accompany

¹ John Paul II, *Letter to the Elderly*, n. 12.

Christ on his journey towards the cross. You do not shed tears alone and you do not shed any in vain (cf. Ps 56:9). Through pain he redeemed pain, and through pain you collaborate in his redemptive work (cf. Col 24). Take your sufferings as his embrace and transform it into blessing'.²

The patient acceptance, in Christ, of one's condition of illness and suffering enriches the spiritual heritage of the Church and one's own religious institute. This is valuable witness of which the Church and religious institutes always have need. Religious sisters and brothers who live their old age and infirmity adhering to the salvific will of the Lord are not at the margins of the mission of their institutes but, rather, participants in their apostolic dynamism. Indeed, 'they are placed in the heart of the charismatic mission itself' and take part in it in a new and effective way.³ This is the greatest treasure that elderly and sick men and women religious can offer to humanity. From this treasure of redemption continually descend to the Church, our institutes and society, grace, salvation, consolation and hope!

Living with our Elderly and Sick Religious Brothers and Sisters

The need to prepare ourselves for growing old in a healthy way!

We are humans, not angels, and it was specifically in this frail and vulnerable human condition that one day, at a certain point in our lives, we were touched by divine grace in a mysterious way. We have been chosen, instructed and sent into the world as men and women Camillians to be and proclaim *good news* (the Gospel). Today we are faced with the challenge of re-establishing ties of intergenerational solidarity against an ideology that segregates, isolates and easily discards elderly people.

Our esteemed Fr. Calisto Vendrame – a former Superior General – in a text addressed thirty years ago to his elderly religious brothers, already warned us that there is no need to separate our elderly. Their presence in our communities, when their experience is combined with wisdom, is a true blessing. Knowing how to listen and engage in dialogue in order to discover and meet the real needs of the elderly of which they are often fully aware. Another important point 'is to help the elderly to live their lives in all their dimensions, not taking their place' (cf. CIC, n. 147, year XII, 20 April, 1982, pp. 155-158). In other words, to help is to respect the role of the elderly, their autonomy, even if it is reduced, without being paternalistic or adopting attitudes where they are treated as children.

'Some elderly people become unpleasant unnecessarily in good faith (although it is not always 'good faith') because they feel obliged in conscience to see, correct and perhaps to censor and at times also to denounce. I would like if this were possible to spare them these sufferings, like the community, dispensing them from this obligation. When we are elderly, if we do not have the responsibility of being a Superior (who is the father of a community), we will all be more loved if we know how to behave like 'grandfathers' rather than like 'fathers'. The Book of Sirach advised this more than two thousand years ago: 'But you should know what you are talking about and not disturb the music'' (Sir 32:3).

Father Calisto warned us: 'It seems to me to be important for us as religious to know how to grow old with wisdom and serenity, to prepare ourselves in time to overcome the barrier of age without traumas. Knowing how to resist the two temptations of those who grow old: that of not accepting reality and not leaving tasks which we cannot perform adequately to other people, and the opposite one of losing confidence in our own strengths, even if reduced, and abandoning everything. The secret lies in knowing how to leave some activities and engage in others that are more congruous to our own strengths, without ever losing interest in life'.

² Giovanni Paolo II, *Giovanni Paolo II e gli anziani*, Baracco L. (ed.), Collana "Servizio dell'unità" L.D.C. n. 32, Turin, 1982, n. 4.

³Cf. *Vita Fr.* n. 68.

‘If I could give advice to my younger religious brothers I would say: be full of understanding and love towards our elderly religious who with great sacrifice opened up the roads down which we now travel with tranquillity. They sacrificed themselves so that we could have what they could never have had. They need our gratitude and our affection. Open your eyes to see what they need, given that a ‘beloved elderly person is a winter full of flowers’.

‘To my older and sick brothers I say: we need your wisdom, example, prayer and warmth. Your presence in the community is precious not only because it gives us the joy of serving, like Christ himself, and anyway repaying what you have done for us, but also it enables us to recognise that without you the community would feel rather like an orphan and could also forget some dimensions of a reality that we should take into consideration so that our lives are more real’.

‘We also know that we can have ‘nights of the spirit’ because God is not easy for anybody, even though He is love or more precisely specifically because He is ‘Love’. Seeing you address in a serene way the ageing process, seeing you live not only with memories but also dreams and projects, we also feel more serene and encouraged, travelling as we do down the same roads: we can look to the future with hope’.

Here the pathway we should follow is pointed to: the construction of a horizon of hope. To our elderly and sick religious let us express our care, respect and gratitude. Our young men and adults – the elderly of tomorrow – have before them a mission and an existential choice and nobody can take their place in this responsibility. Thus we ask ourselves the following question: how are we ageing? Are we taking care of *the elderly person* who is silently growing inside us? What kind of elderly people will we be in the future and how are we managing our interior world? Some live only through memories, they proclaim and pray the ‘psalms of life’s lamentations’: are some still capable of dreams, projects and gratitude?

May St. Camillus, the holy martyrs to charity, the Blesseds Enrico Rebuschini, Luigi Tezza, Giuseppina Vannini and Maria Domenica Brun Barbantini, who have preceded us in heaven, protect us, and may the grandparents of Jesus, Anne and Joachim, inspire in us a style to address the moments of suffering of life, with gospel serenity, so as to grow old with wisdom and elegance!

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