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## Respect for older people in the pastoral care of the Church

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## Abstract

### *Respect for older people in the pastoral care of the Church*

The purpose of the presented article is to answer the question of how the Church implements support for seniors in its pastoral ministry. To answer this question, the author used the pastoral paradigm of seeing, judging, acting. At the beginning, the concepts of old age were explained, then the issue of old age in the teaching of the Church was discussed and finally, what specific help for the elderly consists of was presented. In its pastoral activity, the Church offers many opportunities for such development. Its most important element is spiritual care such as: participation in Holy Mass, use of the sacrament of reconciliation, anointing of the sick, participation in pilgrimages, retreats, days of recollection, catechesis for adults. It is important to organize groups for seniors. These are often prayer communities, Bible circles, Apostolate of the Sick, or other religious brotherhoods and associations. Pastoral proposals include the involvement of seniors in parishes by undertaking various liturgical services, e.g.: extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, acolytes, lectors, or animators of services. They can also help in pilgrimage centers, parishes and clinics, and provide tutoring for children and young people. The Church's duty is to help provide assistance to the elderly, for example through the institution of Caritas. Support groups, volunteering focused on helping the elderly should be created, as well as community day care centers for seniors, senior clubs, or occasional religious services for the elderly.

**Keywords:** aging, old age, human dignity, pastoral care, charitable activity

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## Abstrakt

### *Szacunek wobec osób starszych w pastoralnej trosce Kościoła*

Celem prezentowanego artykułu jest odpowiedź na pytanie, w jaki sposób Kościół realizuje wsparcie seniorów w swojej duszpasterskiej posłudze. Aby odpowiedzieć na to pytanie, autor posłużył się pastoralnym paradygmatem: widzieć, osądzić, działać. Na początku zostały wyjaśnione pojęcia dotyczące starości, następnie została omówiona problematyka starości w nauczaniu Kościoła, na koniec wyjaśniono, na czym polega konkretna pomoc wobec osób w podeszłym wieku. W swojej działalności duszpasterskiej Kościół proponuje wiele możliwości takiego wyparcia. Najważniejszym jego elementem jest opieka duchowa, taka jak: uczestnictwo we mszy świętej, korzystanie z sakramentu pojednania, namaszczenia chorych, udział w pielgrzymkach, rekolekcjach, dniach skupienia, katecheza dla dorosłych. Ważne jest organizowanie grup dla seniorów. Często są to wspólnoty modlitewne, kręgi biblijne, Apostolstwo Chorych, czy inne bractwa i stowarzyszenia religijne. Propozycje pastoralne obejmują zaangażowanie się seniorów w parafiach poprzez podejmowanie różnych usług li-

turgicznych, np.: nadzwyczajnych szafarzy Komunii Świętej, akolitów, lektorów czy animatorów nabożeństw. Mogą oni pomagać także w ośrodkach pielgrzymkowych, parafiah i poradniach, udzielać korepetycji dla dzieci i młodzieży. Powinnością Kościoła jest niesienie pomocy osobom starszym, choćby poprzez instytucję Caritas. Należy tworzyć grupy wsparcia, wolontariat ukierunkowany na pomoc ludziom starszym, a także środowiskowe domy pobytu dziennego dla seniorów, kluby seniora oraz okolicznościowe nabożeństwa dla osób starszych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** starzenie się, starość, godność człowieka, duszpasterstwo, działalność charytatywna

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In its teaching, the Church emphasizes the special importance of seniors. Defending the dignity of the elderly is very important, because in today's society, where the cult of efficiency reigns, there is a temptation to treat the elderly as a useless burden.<sup>1</sup> There is a danger that contemporary culture, which values economic calculation, efficiency, well-being, beauty and strength, can see the elderly as an inconvenient burden and relegate them to the margins of family and social life.<sup>2</sup>

In order to meet the needs of the growing group of seniors, the Church sees "the elderly are considered essential in ensuring stability, continuity and the historic memory in families and society."<sup>3</sup> One of the most important tasks of the Church is to defend every person, especially the elderly, the suffering, the disabled and the lonely.<sup>4</sup> An important role in the mission of the Church is played by pastoral care for seniors. It focuses on the parish liturgy, especially the Eucharist. Participation in Bible

1 Cf. Jan Paweł II, Audiencja generalna Cenna rola starszych w Kościele, Watykan, 7.09.1994, "L'Osservatore Romano" Polish ed. 11 (1994) no. 1, pp. 38–39.

2 Cf. Jan Paweł II, Środki przekazu społecznego i problemy ludzi starszych. Orędzie na XVI Światowy Dzień Środków Przekazu Społecznego, Watykan, 10.05.1982, 4, in: [Jan Paweł II], O cierpieniu. Wypowiedzi Ojca Świętego do chorych i pracowników służby zdrowia. Część 2 (1982–1984), selection and elaboration M. Kloss, Niepokalanów 1988, p. 27.

3 XIV Ordinary General Assembly. The final report of the Synod of Bishops to the holy father, pope Francis, 25.10.2015, 7, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20151026\\_relauzione-finale-xiv-assemblea\\_en.html#The\\_Family\\_as\\_the\\_Irreplaceable\\_Resource\\_of\\_Society](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relauzione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html#The_Family_as_the_Irreplaceable_Resource_of_Society) (April 26, 2024).

4 Cf. J. R. Błachnio, Starość człowieka w myśl filozoficzno-społecznej, "Exlibris. Biblioteka Gerontologii Społecznej" 9 (2015) no 1, p. 83.

circles, the Apostolate of the Sick or other religious brotherhoods and associations is also important. Active involvement of seniors in places of worship, pilgrimage centres, parishes and clinics is valuable. We cannot forget about seniors who need help, living without sufficient means of subsistence. There is room here for social and charitable activities.

## 1. Understanding old age and ageing

Old age is sometimes referred to as the *autumn of life* by analogy to the seasons that follow one after another in the natural environment. According to John Paul II, there is some similarity between biological rhythms of man and cycles of life in nature, which he himself is also a part of.<sup>5</sup>

Just as the autumn season includes not only harvest and festive splendour of colours, but also balding of branches, falling and decay of leaves [...], so old age is not only a strong final chord or a summary of life, but also a time of withering, a time when to someone the world becomes alien, life is a burden, and the body is a torment.<sup>6</sup>

In order to specify the concept of the beginning of old age, two categories are distinguished: calendar age, determined by years of life, and biological age determined by individual personal characteristics. Four boundaries are proposed to define old age: chronological, biological, legal (statutory retirement threshold) and economic (retirement from professional activity). Currently, the following thresholds of old age are distinguished: early old age (60–74 years), late old age (75–89 years), longevity (90 years and above).<sup>7</sup>

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5 Cf. John Paul II, *Letter to my elderly brothers and sisters*, 5, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_01101999\\_elderly.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_01101999_elderly.html) (April 26, 2024).

6 Jan Paweł II, *W doświadczeniach starości łącząc się z Chrystusem na Krzyżu. Przemówienie podczas spotkania z ludźmi starymi w katedrze w Monachium*, 19.11.1980, in: *Nauczanie papieskie*, red. E. Weron, A. Jaroch, t. 3, cz. 2, Poznań–Warszawa 1986, pp. 699–704.

7 E. Trafiałek, *Starość*, w: *Encyklopedia pedagogiczna XXI wieku*, Warszawa 2006, vol. 5, p. 947.

Old age can be defined in various ways. Physicians will pay attention to objective and measurable factors resulting from the current state of knowledge and research. On the other hand, representatives of social sciences focus on other, non-medical aspects, including economic, political and social ones.<sup>8</sup>

An elderly person must constantly struggle with the effects of biological ageing. According to biologists, the first signs of ageing appear after the age of 40. Facial features and body shape begin to change more and more visibly. This is associated with a gradual loss of physical attractiveness, which in middle age may be one of the causes of crisis. Biological changes also result in psychosocial problems.<sup>9</sup> Old age is the last period of a person's life, which inevitably ends in death, and is led to by a natural, long-term physiological process called ageing.<sup>10</sup>

Lifespan and the rate of ageing depend on genetic factors, lifestyle and environmental influences. The process of ageing in men is generally faster. The average lifespan worldwide is over 60 years and varies greatly. On average, women live for 6 years longer than men on a global scale, although there are also significant differences here.<sup>11</sup>

Senior changes are commonly understood as the gradual loss of tissues and organs, leading to a decrease in the body's efficiency. This applies to, for example, muscle strength, vital capacity of the lungs, adaptive capacity of the eye lens, the speed of impulses in nerve fibres, renal filtration, basic metabolic rate and many other changes.<sup>12</sup>

Today, thanks to medical knowledge, we can better understand old age as a common and universal phenomenon, and consequently rethink

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8 Cf. K. Zamorska, M. Makuch, *Starzenie się społeczeństwa. Wymiar społeczny, gospodarczy i polityczny*, Kraków 2018, pp. 29–30.

9 Cf. H. Zielińska-Więczkowska, K. Kędziora-Kornatowska, T. Kornatowski, *Starość jako wyzwanie*, „*Gerontologia Polska*” 16 (2008) no. 3, p. 134.

10 Cf. M. Bosacka, G. Bączyk, A. Ulatowska, *Aspekty psychospołeczne życia osób w wieku podeszłym a możliwości opieki*, „*Pielęgniarstwo Polskie*” 61 (2016) no. 3, p. 440.

11 Cf. H. Zielińska-Więczkowska, K. Kędziora-Kornatowska, T. Kornatowski, *Starość jako wyzwanie*, p. 131.

12 D. Zawadzka, M. Stalmach, *Problemy psychologiczne osób w okresie starości. cz. I: Najważniejsze wyzwania i trudności*, „*Hygeia Public Health*” 50 (2015) no. 2, pp. 301–302.

social policy actions, with particular attention to the needs of people at different stages of old age. This helps to prepare programs aimed at including these people in society, educating and raising general awareness about the senior age.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Old age in the thought of the contemporary Church

The Church emphasizes that each elderly person, like each individual, is entitled to be treated with dignity. Suffering, old age, and the proximity of death do not diminish dignity.<sup>14</sup> According to Pope Francis, “where there is no honour for the elderly, there is no future for the young.”<sup>15</sup>

Meeting the needs of the growing number of seniors, the Church looks at the elderly with love, gratitude and great respect. Seniors are an essential part of the Christian community and society, therefore sensitivity to the elderly is an essential feature of the civilization.<sup>16</sup>

The measure of a society’s verification is the protection it given to its weakest members. A society turns to be just to the extent that it provides all its members with necessary care. Francis has repeatedly warned that “a nation that does not take care of its grandparents and does not respect them has no future, because it has no memory, it has lost it.” He also lamented that so many seniors are “abandoned” in nursing homes. The elderly, having lived a long life and being detached from many issues, can provide spiritual and existential support for the young.<sup>17</sup>

John Paul II repeatedly addressed young people to treat the older generation with respect, to take care of good relationships, to benefit from the experience and life wisdom of older people, to show solidarity

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. K. Zamorska, M. Makuch, *Starzenie się społeczeństwa*, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Franciszek, *Starość nie jest do wyrzucenia*, “Vatican News” 26.04.2025, <https://www.vaticannews.va/pl/papiez/news/2025-04/franciszek-i-ludzie-starsi-starosc-nie-jest-do-wyrzucenia.html> (April 30, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Francis, General audience *The family – 6. The elderly*, 4.03.2015, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150304\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150304_udienza-generale.html) (April 20, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> Franciszek, *Korzenie i pamięć społeczeństwa. Przemówienie podczas audiencji dla członków włoskich organizacji seniorów*, 15.10.2016, [https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/franciszek\\_i/przemowienia/seniorzy\\_15102016.html](https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/franciszek_i/przemowienia/seniorzy_15102016.html) (April 17, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. B. Szatur-Jaworska, P. Błędowski, M. Dziegieleska, *Podstawy gerontologii społecznej*, Warszawa 2006, p. 104.

with them, because every person lives and enriches themselves internally by opening up to another person.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, there should be a place for everyone and secured living conditions, “especially when it comes to those who, due to illness or age, have to struggle with greater difficulties.”<sup>19</sup>

Pope Francis recalled that the tradition of the Church indicates that older people should be teachers of wisdom. The Church cannot and does not want to submit to a mentality of impatience, and even less so of indifference and contempt towards old age. We must awaken a collective sense of gratitude, appreciation, and hospitality that make older people feel like a living part of their community. Old age does not bypass anyone, and we should be grateful to those who preceded us for what we have received from them. This applies especially to lonely and sick elderly people, who cannot be abandoned to their fate.<sup>20</sup>

The Church calls for the appreciation of seniors. According to John Paul II:

Senior people are no longer an exception today. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have more and more seniors, which is why we need to see their value. After all, they are essential to the family, society, the Church, the nation as transmitters of values, traditions, norms and models.<sup>21</sup>

It is also important to awaken respect and love for the elderly among young people, because their presence in society is a value, not only in the socio-cultural dimension, but increasingly also in the economic dimension.<sup>22</sup> If there is a place for today's grandparents in our family life

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Letter to my elderly brothers and sisters*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world Gaudium et spes*, 7.12.1965, 66, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) (April 21, 2024).

<sup>20</sup> Franciszek, *O wdzięczności wobec osób starszych*.

<sup>21</sup> Jan Paweł II, *Ludzie starsi są potrzebni. Przemówienie w Castel Gandolfo*, 25.07.1999, in: *Jan Paweł II, Dzieła zebrane*, vol. 16, Kraków 2006, p. 393.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. J. R. Błachnio, A. Błachnio, *Starość jako zadanie dla człowieka – inspiracje w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II*, “*Rozprawy Społeczne*” 9 (2015) no. 4, p. 61.

and they are an important part of it, we can count on similar treatment when we ourselves grow old.<sup>23</sup>

Older people help us to look at earthly events more wisely, because they have gained knowledge and maturity through life experiences. They are the guardians of collective memory, and therefore have a special title to be the exponents of common ideals and values that are the foundation and rule of social life.<sup>24</sup>

We need to remember to educate young people in the spirit of solidarity with the elderly. A bond between generations is needed.<sup>25</sup>

The tasks of seniors include sharing life experiences, wisdom and family support through prayer and testimony of faith. John Paul II said to them: "You who are elderly have acquired knowledge, wisdom and experience. I ask you to share this with the younger generation. You have something very important to offer the world, and your contribution is purified and enriched by the patience and love that you possess when you are united with Christ."<sup>26</sup> It must be emphasized that old age is an integral part of human destiny, intended by the Creator. Only then does a person have the chance to live well in the autumn of his life, when he turns towards God, His transcendence and in Him finds the answer to many questions, including the most important one – about the meaning of human life.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. J. Lewicka, Wartość doświadczenia osób starszych dla rozwoju ludzi młodych w nauczaniu papieża Franciszka, "Colloquia Theologica Ottoniana" 2019 no. 1, p. 105.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. J. Makselon, Psychologiczno-egzystencjalne aspekty starości, in: Starość. Problem czy szansa? Refleksja pastoralno-teologiczna, ed. J. Dziedzic, Kraków 2015, p. 164.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. A. A. Karwowska, Człowiek wobec starości: wątki bioetyczne i filozoficzne, in: Starość. Poznać, przeżyć, zrozumieć, eds. M. Halicka, J. Halicki, E. Kramkowska, Białystok 2016, p. 322.

<sup>26</sup> Jan Paweł II, Chrześcijański sens cierpienia i starości. Przemówienie wygłoszone w szpitalu św. Karola Boromeusza w Ontitsha (Nigeria), 13.02.1982, in: Nauczanie papieskie, vol. V, 1, Poznań 1993, p. 187.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. P. Brudek, A. Ochman, T. Rehlis, R. Sadlak, Duszpasterstwo osób starszych w aspekcie społecznym, p. 317, [https://e.kul.pl/files/93237/public/artykuly\\_w\\_prazech\\_zbiorowych/brudek\\_ochman\\_rehlis\\_sadlak.pdf](https://e.kul.pl/files/93237/public/artykuly_w_prazech_zbiorowych/brudek_ochman_rehlis_sadlak.pdf) (April 27, 2024).

### 3. Pastoral care for the elderly

The pastoral ministry of the Church is to strengthen the faithful in their faith.<sup>28</sup> Considering the fact that sociologists, based on demographic data, confirm the fact that societies in Europe, including Poland, are aging, the role of ministry for seniors should be appreciated.<sup>29</sup>

John Paul II wrote in his Lent message of 2005:

Care for the elderly, especially when they are going through difficult times, should be close to the hearts of the faithful, especially in the ecclesial communities.<sup>30</sup>

In turn, Pope Francis in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (no. 202) emphasized that as Christians “we are called to care for the most vulnerable inhabitants of the earth.” This includes the elderly. The pastoral care and apostolic commitment of seniors now demand recognition and a clearer appreciation in the life of the Church.

#### 3.1. Pastoral care for seniors

Ministry for seniors is an important area of pastoral care for the Church. In the exhortation *Christifideles laici* We read:

A vast area in which the Catholic Church has made and continues to make an important and lasting contribution to the elderly is the mission of evangelization and the pastoral care of people of third and fourth age.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. S. Bukalski, Śmierć i umieranie. Aspekty psychologiczno-pastoralne, “*Studia Paradyskis*” 24 (2014), p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. P. Brudek, A. Ochman, T. Rehlis, R. Sadlak, *Duszpasterstwo osób starszych*, p. 318.

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 22.11.1981, 19, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_1981122\\_familiaris-consortio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_1981122_familiaris-consortio.html) (April 23, 2024).

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 30.12.1988, 48, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_30121988\\_christifideles-laici.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html) (April 23, 2024).

Given the great variety of situations and living conditions of the elderly, the Church includes seniors in its pastoral activity and wants to carefully recognize their needs, help them overcome apathy and integrate them without any discrimination into the community of believers.<sup>32</sup>

The basis for supporting the elderly in the Church is the appropriate formation of believers aimed at shaping a Christian approach to old age, i.e. discovering the spiritual, moral and theological depth of this stage of life.<sup>33</sup> The most important place for this pastoral care is the parish community. It is primarily in the parish that the elderly should feel at home and have the opportunity to look at their lives from the perspective of the Gospel.<sup>34</sup>

In most parishes in Poland, the elderly are guaranteed pastoral spiritual care. The Church carries out the task of caring for the elderly by supporting their striving for holiness and by deepening the significant participation of seniors in religious practices, including the sacraments, or by conducting special catechesis for this age group.<sup>35</sup>

Pastoral care for people of the third and fourth age should facilitate the participation of older people in the celebration of the Eucharist, the use of the sacrament of reconciliation, participation in pilgrimages, retreats and days of recollection. The elderly should also be accompanied spiritually. They should be provided with the possibility of receiving the sacrament of anointing the sick.<sup>36</sup>

The basic forms of pastoral care for seniors include preaching the Word of God, liturgy and diaconate. Preaching should lead to a deeper

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<sup>32</sup> John Paul II, *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation Christifideles laici*, 48.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. R. Bieleń, *Duszpasterstwo ludzi starszych ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem osób owodowiątych*, "Seminare" 29 (2011), p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. J. Ostrowski, W. Przygoda, *Seniorów duszpasterstwo*, in: *Leksykon teologii pastoralnej*, ed. R. Kamiński, Lublin 2006, p. 789 (quoted after A. Kalbarczyk, "Nie odtrącaj mnie w starości". O potrzebie profilowanego przepowiadania dla seniorów, "Polonia Sacra" 19 (2014) no. 1, p. 116).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Papieska Rada ds. Świeckich, *Godność i posłannictwo ludzi starszych w Kościele i świecie*, in: *Ludzie starsi w rodzinie i społeczeństwie*, eds. W. Gubała, S. Kania, Kraków 1999, pp. 153–157.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Papieska Rada ds. Świeckich, *Godność i posłannictwo ludzi starszych w Kościele i świecie*, 1.10.1998, 5.

experience of the Eucharist.<sup>37</sup> Pastors should help seniors realize their vocation in the Church and the world, so that they look at their old age as a natural stage of life, as a valuable time that can be lived in an attitude of trust in God and, if possible, commitment to the community.<sup>38</sup>

An important form of support for the elderly is religious education.<sup>39</sup> As a person enters old age, they increasingly often confront the problem of losing strength, the meaning of suffering, death and immortality. These questions should be answered by pastors and lay people prepared for this in catechesis for adults.

From a pastoral point of view, organized groups for seniors are very important. They are often prayer communities, such as parish rosary circles or the “Margaretka” apostolate, associated with prayer and spiritual adoption of priests. Bible circles are appearing more and more often at parishes, in which participants pray the Word of God and reflect on it together. A very dynamically developing movement in the Church in Europe, as well as in America, is the Apostolate of Good Death.<sup>40</sup>

It is also important to encourage elderly people to participate in the Apostolate of the Sick or in other religious brotherhoods and associations. Such parish groups they can help in experiencing a Christian approach to the passing of life and thus satisfy the need for a religious dimension to permeate human existence.<sup>41</sup>

It seems very important to have more active involvement of seniors in pilgrimage centres, parishes and clinics. It also seems valuable to enable them to take on liturgical services: extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, acolytes, lectors or animators of religious services.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> T. Dyk, *Samotność ludzi starszych w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II*, “Colloquia Theologica Ottoniana” 2015 no. 1, p. 236.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. A. Kalbarczyk, “Nie odtrącaj mnie w starości”. O potrzebie profilowanego przepowiadania dla seniorów, “Polonia Sacra” 19 (2014) no. 1, p. 129.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. B. Grümme, *Nicht nur Häkeln und Bingo spielen. Das Alter als religiös-pädagogische Herausforderung*, in: *Starość. Problem czy szansa?*, p. 218.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. P. Brudek, A. Ochman, T. Rehlis, R. Sadlak, *Duszpasterstwo osób starszych*, pp. 319–320.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. J. Leonowicz, *Duszpasterstwo ludzi starych*, in: *Duszpasterstwo specjalistyczne*, eds. R. Kamiński, B. Drożdż, Lublin 1998, p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. W. Przygoda, *Starych duszpasterstwo*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 18, ed. E. Gigi-lewicz, Lublin 2013, col. 868–870; E. Wiszowaty, *Starość się nie wybiera. Wiek sędziwy w perspektywie teologiczno-pastoralnej*, “Forum Teologiczne” 17 (2016), pp. 35–36.

The Church also develops the evangelizing mission of the elderly by engaging seniors in pastoral work, especially in work with families and within religious associations. In this case, their “historical memory” should be used, valuing the educational role of grandparents. Working apostolic in pastoral structures, the elderly can contribute much good to the liturgy and other prayer meetings, to charitable activities, to commitment to the “civilization of life” and to experiencing existential experiences, especially illness and suffering.<sup>43</sup>

An important proposal for ecclesial influence on the elderly is pilgrimage ministry. It can be observed that seniors are among the people most eager to go on a community trip. This is a convenient opportunity for pastors to integrate groups operating in the parish, and also to show that there is a place in the parish for both younger and older people.<sup>44</sup> It should be added that the number of groups in the parish significantly affects the sense of community among all parishioners, and makes it easier for seniors to find their own group that meets their expectations and specific religious needs. Apostolic involvement contributes to fuller integration of the elderly with the parish community.<sup>45</sup>

### **3.2. Involvement of seniors in the parish**

John Paul II not only asks the elderly for support, but also reminds us that the Church remembers them and counts on them:

The Church continues to need you. It highly appreciates the services you continue to be ready to render to it in various areas of the apostolate, it counts on your contribution of persevering prayer, it awaits your advice and it is enriched by the evangelical witness you offer every day.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Papieska Rada ds. Świeckich, Godność i posłannictwo ludzi starszych w Kościele i świecie, in: *Ludzie starsi w rodzinie i społeczeństwie*, pp. 157–163.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. P. Brudek, A. Ochman, T. Rehlis, R. Sadlak, *Duszpasterstwo osób starszych*, p. 320.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. W. Przygoda, *Wyzwania duszpasterskie wobec osób w podeszłym wieku*, in: *Starość. Problem czy szansa?*, pp. 92–93.

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, *Letter to my elderly brothers and sisters*, 13.

In the context of Christian faith and hope, old age can be experienced as a gift from God and as a task to be performed. Senior citizens have been given a special charism “to use their talents and physical strengths in a proper way for their own satisfaction and for the good of others.”<sup>47</sup>

The charisma typical of old age, such as wisdom, life experience, patient endurance of suffering, and the practice of prayer, constitute the theological basis for the apostolic commitment of older people.<sup>48</sup>

*Exhortation Christifideles laici* emphasises that

retirement age opens up new opportunities for older people to continue their apostolic work, which they must undertake courageously, decisively overcoming the temptation to lock themselves up in nostalgia in memories of a past that will never return. They must become increasingly aware that their role in the Church and in society does not end with age, but merely takes on a new form.<sup>49</sup>

The phenomenon of the ageing of European and Polish society generates many social problems today, which do not remain without influence on the pastoral activity of the Church. Pastors should constantly remember that just as the Church is important for the elderly, so each elderly person is important for the Church. Seniors have a specific mission to fulfil in it. They are irreplaceable apostles, especially in the area of building family ties, charitable activity, in the saving experience of suffering and prayer. The pastoral challenge is to ensure that seniors are aware of their apostolic tasks in the phase of life they are living.<sup>50</sup>

The Church needs senior citizens and the more pastors realize this, the greater will be the fruits of this activity and the satisfaction on both sides. This group has a great potential for ecclesial activity that cannot be wasted. It is important that pastors increasingly eagerly seek new solutions to help senior citizens get closer to God and feel needed.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Jan Paweł II, Audiencja generalna Cenna rola starszych w Kościele, p. 39.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. W. Przygoda, Wyzwania duszpasterskie wobec osób w podeszłym wieku, p. 97.

<sup>49</sup> John Paul II, Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 48.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. I. Celary, Troska duszpasterska wobec osób starszych, p. 81.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. P. Brudek, A. Ochman, T. Rehlis, R. Sadlak, *Duszpasterstwo osób starszych*, p. 322,

The religious activity of the elderly can become more complete, the more the clergy surrounds them with pastoral counselling.<sup>52</sup> The involvement of the elderly in the parish can take various forms. It can be tutoring for children and youth, filling out tax returns by former office workers in the administrative sector. When including the elderly in specific activities, their old skills and character traits should be taken into account, because they are afraid of new, difficult tasks for them.<sup>53</sup>

Seniors can also participate in church organizations and movements, engaging in the “culture and defence of life.” By accepting suffering and death in a Christian way, they can bear witness to the sanctity and inviolability of life from conception to natural death.<sup>54</sup> An elderly person in the community of believers can fulfil many functions. They need life experience, prayer, presence and even suffering. Thanks to their religious activity, they can influence the upbringing of the younger generation. Their presence in society shapes attitudes towards the sick and those in need of help.

### 3.3. Social and charitable activities

In the Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, John Paul II spoke of particular types of pastoral care in relation to various categories of people, among whom he mentioned “the elderly, often forced to live in solitude and without sufficient means of subsistence.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the conciliar Decree on the Apostolate of the laity, among the various types of apostolate, mentions “ensuring for the elderly not only the necessary means of living, but also a fair share in the fruits of economic progress.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. I. Kochan, *Rola aktywności religijnej w adaptacji do starości*, “Rocznik Teologiczny” 51 (2009) no. 1–2, p. 141.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Q. Kämpel, *Rehabilitacja w gerontopsychiatrii*, “Psychiatria Polska” 13 (1979) no. 2, p. 54.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 48.

<sup>55</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 19.

<sup>56</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree on the apostolate of the laity *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 18.11.1965, 20, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651118\\_apostolicam-actuositatem\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html) (April 21, 2024).

The Church respects the poor and the sick and supports works of mercy and mutual aid, aimed at providing assistance in various human needs.<sup>57</sup> It carries out this mission primarily through the institution of Caritas.<sup>58</sup> An important direction of social and charitable activity should be to raise awareness and organize help in the immediate environment of the sick and lonely. The aim is to activate neighbours, residents of neighbourhoods and members of parishes, so that by organizing help, they can relieve the family or specialized organizations designed to provide help.<sup>59</sup>

The basis of charitable and social care for the elderly is to provide them with a friendly environment, the best of which is a family home. Care for the elderly is particularly difficult and requires appropriate predispositions and commitment of the caregiver. Therefore, in the local environment of the parish, commune, housing estate, support groups, volunteering focused on helping the elderly, as well as community day care homes for seniors should be created. Community centres and day care homes for the elderly are also a good form of care for the elderly, which allow them to meet in a wider group of peers. Weekly or longer charity vacations for the poorest seniors are also needed.<sup>60</sup>

Many parishes have senior clubs. In such groups, usually run by parish volunteers in cooperation with pastors, the emphasis is primarily on regular meetings in the community.<sup>61</sup> For members of the senior club, catechesis, lectures, meetings with interesting people or evenings with religious poetry prepared by the youth can be organized.<sup>62</sup>

In parish ministry, occasional services for the elderly should be organized. The occasion for such meetings may be Grandparents' Day, World Day of the Sick, Christmas Eve, Easter, parish fair. Active seniors can be

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<sup>57</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree on the apostolate of the laity *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. J. R. Błachnio, A. Błachnio, *Starość jako zadanie dla człowieka*, p. 60.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. I. Celary, *Troska duszpasterska wobec osób starszych*, p. 80.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. W. Przygoda, *Wyzwania duszpasterskie wobec osób w podeszłym wieku*, pp. 93–95.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. P. Brudek, A. Ochman, T. Rehlis, R. Sadlak, *Duszpasterstwo osób starszych*, pp. 320–321.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. W. Przygoda, *Wyzwania duszpasterskie wobec osób w podeszłym wieku*, pp. 89–90.

involved in various parish projects. These may be office work, cleaning, running the parish shop, or running a holiday fair.<sup>63</sup>

Caritas branches can provide significant assistance to families in caring for the elderly and sick. Parishes often have charity groups, soup kitchens, and pastors work with social welfare centres, where they are often chaplains. The activities of religious congregations are important, as they realize their charisma in the service of others and provide assistance to those most in need, including the elderly.<sup>64</sup>

In the exhortation *Christifideles laici* The Pope encourages us to

educate young members of ecclesial organizations and movements to express solidarity with the elderly and be grateful towards them, especially the weak and suffering, so that a new, more Christian and humane society can be born in the future.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusions

Old age is defined as the autumn of life, the second youth, the golden age of life and the third age. The ageing process is determined biologically, socially, culturally and psychologically. Old age therefore appears as a multidimensional reality that reveals a number of problems, but at the same time it is an opportunity.

The Church meets the needs of the elderly. It does this through its teaching and pastoral ministry. The elderly must be viewed first and foremost in the light of their human dignity, which does not fade with the passage of time and the deterioration of their mental and physical condition.

Seniors play a major role in pastoral activity. The most important element of this pastoral care is spiritual care, which includes enabling participation in the Holy Mass, using the sacrament of reconciliation, anointing the sick, participation in pilgrimages, retreats, days of recollection, catechesis for adults. It is important to organize groups for

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. W. Przygoda, *Wyzwania duszpasterskie wobec osób w podeszczym wieku*, p. 92.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. J. R. Błachnio, *Starość człowieka w myśl filozoficzno-spłecznej*, p. 83.

<sup>65</sup> John Paul II, Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 48.

seniors. These are often prayer communities, Bible circles, Apostolate of the Sick, and other religious brotherhoods and associations.

It seems very important to engage seniors who are still active in providing their help in places of worship, pilgrimage centres, parishes and clinics. It also seems valuable to enable them to take on liturgical practices: extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, acolytes, lectors or animators of religious services.

The involvement of older people in the parish can take various forms. It can be conducting classes and tutoring for children and young people. Seniors have a specific mission to fulfil in the Church. They are irreplaceable apostles, especially in the area of building family ties, charitable activities, in the saving experience of suffering and prayer.

The Church's duty is to help provide the elderly with the necessary means of living, to support works of mercy and mutual assistance, through the institution of Caritas. In the local environment of the parish, commune, housing estate there is need for support groups and voluntary help for the elderly. Community day care centres for seniors, universities of the third age, senior clubs should be created. Regular meetings in the community, as well as occasional services for the elderly and charity vacations should be organized.

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