
Pope Francis: “Do not barter the faith for a handful of quiet days”

The elderly as a role model for young people, with regard to their behaviours and their choices of faith and life. **Pope Francis** has repeatedly highlighted the importance of their witness for the younger generations. He returned on this subject this morning during the **general audience in St Peter's Square**, continuing his cycle of catechesis on old age, with a special focus on the biblical figure of **Eleazar**, in his nineties. The biblical story recounts the episode of the Jews being forced by a king's decree to eat meat sacrificed to idols. When it's the turn the elderly man highly respected by everyone, who lived at the time of the persecution of **Antiochus Epiphanes**, the king's officials advised him to resort to a pretence, that is, to pretend to eat the meat without actually doing so. In this way Eleazar would be saved. But rather than betray his faith in God, Eleazar preferred death. “His character gives us a testimony of the special relationship that exists between the fidelity of old age and the honour of faith”, the Pope explained. The episode involving Eleazar highlights a reflection: *“Dishonouring the faith in old age, in order to gain a handful of days, cannot be compared with the legacy it must leave to the young, for entire generations to come.”* **Testimony for the young.** Pope Francis' words send a clear message: “An old man who has lived in the coherence of his faith for a whole lifetime, and who now adapts himself to feigning repudiation of it, condemns the new generation to thinking that the whole faith has been a sham, an outer covering that can be abandoned, imagining that it can be preserved interiorly.” Thus, the lesson that can be drawn from Eleazar's behaviour, the Pope pointed out, is that “such behaviour does not honour faith, not even before God.” “And the effect of this external trivialization will be devastating for the inner life of young people.” Francis went on to highlight “the consistency of this man who considers the young!”. In this episode, the Pope views old age as “the decisive place, the irreplaceable place for this testimony.” Since “an elderly person who, because of his vulnerability, accepts that the practice of the faith is irrelevant, would make young people believe that faith has no real relationship with life.” “It would appear to them, from the outset, as a set of behaviours which, if necessary, can be faked or concealed, because none of them is particularly important for life.” **The consistency of faith.** The ancient heterodox “gnosis” – was “a very powerful and very seductive trap for early Christianity”, the Pope said, stressing that it theorised that “faith is a spirituality, not a practice; a strength of the mind, not a form of life.” “Faithfulness and the honour of faith, according to this heresy, have nothing to do with the behaviours of life, the institutions of the community, the symbols of the body – Francis remarked -. The seduction of this perspective is strong, because it interprets, in its own way, an indisputable truth: that faith can never be reduced to a set of dietary rules or social practices.” “The trouble is – Francis denounced - that the Gnostic radicalisation of this truth nullifies the realism of the Christian faith.” And “it makes void the witness of this people, which shows the concrete signs of God in the life of the community and resists the perversions of the mind through the gestures of the body.” **The gnostic temptation remains ever present.** The Pope's words reflect the recognition of the fact that “the gnostic temptation – one of the heresies of this time - remains ever present.” “In many trends in our society and culture, the practice of faith suffers from a negative portrayal, sometimes in the form of cultural irony, sometimes with covert marginalization. The practice of faith for these gnostics is regarded as a useless and even harmful external, as an antiquated residue, as a disguised superstition. In short, something for the elderly.” Perhaps – Francis said – “it is for us older people to give faith back its honour, to make it coherent.” “The practice of faith is not the symbol of our weakness, no, but rather the sign of its strength. Faith deserves respect and honour to the very end: it has changed our lives, it has purified our minds, it has taught us the worship of God and the love of our neighbour. It is a blessing for all!” Finally, Francis' exhortation: *“We will not barter our faith for a handful of quiet days. We will show, in all humility and firmness, precisely in our old age, that believing is not something ‘for the old.’ It's a matter of life.”* **The month dedicated to Mary.** Greeting the pilgrims gathered from various countries, the Pope recalled that May is a month dedicated to Mary. He invited the faithful to pray to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Hence he called on the German-

speaking pilgrims to “invoke Mary's intercession for your own personal intentions, for the intentions of the Church and for peace in the world.” “The month of May has just begun, a month which by tradition is a call to the Christian community to multiply their daily gestures of veneration to the Virgin Mary,” Francis added, addressing the Portuguese-speaking pilgrims. “The secret of her peace and courage was the certainty that 'nothing is impossible for God'. We need to learn this with the Mother of God. Let us show our gratitude by praying the rosary every day.” Addressing the Polish faithful, he recalled that yesterday they celebrated the Feast of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, Queen of Poland, and Blessed Cardinal Wyszyński, who “taught you to place your trust in Mary in the most trying times of your history”. “Following his example, entrust to the Blessed Virgin the fate of your homeland and peace in Europe,” the Pope said. Francis then asked the Italian faithful to regard Mary as “teacher of prayer and spiritual life.”

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