

An Important Pro-Life Cause

“The years pass quickly, and the gift of life, for all the effort and pain it involves, is too beautiful and precious for us ever to grow tired of it.” – Pope John Paul II, 1999.

The Holy Father wrote these words in his 1999 pastoral letter to the elderly. The purpose of his letter was to offer support and encouragement to those who are approaching the final chapter of their lives, though they may be tired or even sick, and to remind them that they are not alone and that God “sustains us and guides us by his providence.”

In this letter he also warned against euthanasia, which he described as “always an intrinsically evil act, a violation of God’s law and an offense against the dignity of the human person.” Instead, he counseled, we need to view life as eternal and “old age too has a proper role to play in this process of gradual maturing along the path to eternity.”

We are reminded of the Holy Father’s words just as a group calling itself “Final Exit Network” displays billboards and other ads here in our Archdiocese and elsewhere urging people with irreversible illness or for whom the “future holds only hopelessness and misery” to take their own lives.

Sadly, their message may appeal to those who view old age and infirmity as the “end of life,” an existence that when too inconvenient, becomes optional.

In last week’s column, I highlighted a number of examples of “pro-life” initiatives in our Archdiocese, including those of Catholic Charities. These are aimed at truly promoting and supporting life, including life outside the womb. Our Church’s social justice mission is dedicated to glorifying God’s great gift of life – in all its stages – through service to those in our midst who are living on the margins, nearer to death

than life in some cases and simply feeling unwanted, unloved and unworthy. While care for the unborn must always be a pro-life cause of ours as a Church, so too should care for the elderly.

“Indeed the provision of care for the elderly should be considered not so much an act of generosity as the repayment of a debt of gratitude,” Pope Benedict XVI advised during his recent apostolic visit to Great Britain during which he visited a home for the elderly.

And nobody, arguably, carries out this mission better than the religious sisters whose life’s work is dedicated to the care of the elderly.

How impressed I have been to personally bear witness to the charisms-at-work of the many religious communities of women present here in our Archdiocese on behalf of our older citizens. Just last week, I visited nursing homes operated by two such communities: St. Martin’s Home for the Aged, operated by the Little Sisters of the Poor, and St. Joseph Nursing Home, administered by the Sister Servants of Mary Immaculate.

In both cases, the residents I met are without doubt happy and well cared-for, with facilities immaculate. Having previously been to Stella Maris, run by the Sisters of Mercy and where my experience was much the same, as well as our Catholic hospitals in the Archdiocese, I have little doubt that this is the case in all of our Catholic-run nursing and healthcare facilities.

Here in the Archdiocese, we are blessed to have five Catholic hospitals, six Catholic nursing homes and assisted living facilities and 21 senior living communities operated by Catholic Charities, which will open another early next year. Along with its senior centers and counseling/referral service, Catholic Charities serves some 5,179 seniors in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Pope John XXIII, prior to becoming Pope and while serving as Apostolic Nuncio to Turkey and Greece, said of the care he witnessed by the Little Sisters of the Poor in Turkey: “Every day I witness with my own eyes the edifying spectacle of the survival of the spirit of simplicity, humility and inexhaustible and trusting generosity that the Little Sisters still offer today in Constantinople. It is as though certain traits of their blessed Mother Foundress shine in each one of them.”

I could offer the same reflections of the selfless servants of God present in the nursing and healthcare facilities here and dare say I suspect the same could be said by visitors to facilities operated by the Church throughout this land!

Care for and respect of the elderly should not be the responsibility of the sisters alone, however, nor that of any other group administering such facilities. It must be ours as a society - one that too often loses sight that we must continue to show respect and love for the elderly if they are to grow old with dignity and youthful in spirit. We owe them our prayers, our support and our interest. They must always know they have a place at the table of our human family even as they await God’s call to join Him in the next life.

Our late pontiff, some six years before his own death, offered to his elderly brethren this personal insight into his faith and view of eternal life: “I often find myself saying, with no trace of melancholy, a prayer recited by priests after 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.”