

GRANDPARENTS' WITNESS, TESTIMONY, AND
PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE TO YOUNG FAMILIES

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Good Afternoon. Rarely does an individual live the fulfilment of a dream. I am humbled to be here today representing grandparents of the world. I am immensely grateful to Cardinal Antonelli and to Msgr. Simon Carlos from the Pontifical Council of the Family for inviting me.

Every one of us is a Grandchild. Many of us are Grandparents. For a moment, let's think about our Grandparents and thank God for them. They have influenced our lives and inspired us, even to this day. I once heard, "You will forget what people say and you will forget what people did, but you will never forget how they made you feel." Grandparents are an extraordinary gift.

I only knew my maternal Grandfather. I was one of ten children and he had the gift to make me feel very special. I remember his great love for me and my sense of safety in his care. It was from him I heard my first Gospel stories. My first image of prayer was at his knee reciting the family Rosary. As children we were surrounded by people of faith - in those times we took our faith for granted. Today, we can no longer take the faith of our Grandchildren for granted.

Nowadays, Grandparents do not get the attention they deserve for the vital contribution they make to the family, the church and society, particularly when it comes to matters of faith.

I am passionate in promoting awareness of the great vocation of Grandparents and the "Ministry of Grandparent's. Very often they do not realize how enormous their sphere of influence really is - emotionally, physically, financially and, most important of all, spiritually. The Church stands to benefit greatly by affirming the vocation of Grandparents and supporting them while they are supporting everyone else. A vocation is a call from God and we feel that God is calling all Christian Grandparents, especially at this time, to take up their sacred duty to pass on their faith.

The special vocation of Catholic Grandparents - to pass on the faith to their Grandchildren - is indeed noble and rewarding and probably the most noble of all vocations, because it is rooted in love. But it is certainly not easy in this day and age if you want to be a Grandparent of integrity.

Even if, in a given family, all the circumstances are favourable - happy marriage, parents practising their religion, children all baptised, and preparing for all the other sacraments - there are still what we might call the background problems; the increasing secularisation of society, the influence of the media, especially television, the power of peer pressure, moral relativity, rising individualism and so on.

Quite apart from the great vocation of passing on the faith, like all great callings, especially spiritual ones, it makes great demands. It is a work which calls for great sensitivity, delicacy, and thoughtfulness. It is unobtrusive, never overbearing, and always respectful of the rights and values of others, especially of parents. It involves always being at hand when needed, but never imposing oneself, never interfering; knowing when to offer a helping hand or a word of advice, but also knowing when to stand back. This is indeed a demanding programme, but it's important to stress that we are doing something vital for God.

Grandparents are role models for their families in passing on morals and values. They are the crucial link that connects generations. They act as primary care-givers, baby-sitters, and are often the family "bank". They are a constant; stabilising force, in a chaotic turbulent world. When there is divorce or breakdown in the family they are the glue that holds the family together. Grandparents are the ones who provide an anchor for bruised and hurting adult children and who provide a source of support and stability for little people whose world has fallen apart. None of this, of course, is unrelated to the fact that, for many Grandparents, faith is their anchor. It allows them to be the centre of stability, because they are secured by something far deeper than themselves.

My faith is very important to me and has sustained me in all the ups and downs of life. I am an Irish Grandmother to ten beautiful Grandchildren; some are not baptised, some of my own children have fallen away from the faith, we have divorce in our family. My husband and I are no strangers to the difficulties, challenges and heartaches of modern day Catholic family life.

In 2002, I founded the Catholic Grandparents Association, whose main aim is to help Grandparents pass on their faith and to value and support them in that role.

It started with a Grandparents' Pilgrimage to the National Shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham in England. The idea was inspired in the medieval Slipper Chapel on Our Lady's birthday. I was wondering what I could possibly give Our Lady for a birthday present that would delight her.

The idea came - a Grandparents' Pilgrimage. - To honour and thank her parents, Saint Joachim and Saint Anne, the Grandparents of Jesus and all Grandparents, for all they have done for us down through the ages, particularly in the transmission of the faith. This would truly delight her.

With the help and encouragement of our local Bishop, the Shrine Director and staff together with the blessing of Blessed John Paul II we began our first Grandparents' Pilgrimage on 26th July 2002 - the Feast Day of Saint's Joachim and Saint Anne. Pope John Paul II said, "Shrines of Our Lady is the natural place for families to go, to pray and give thanks."

In 2006, when we started the Pilgrimages in Ireland, I wrote to our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI, for his blessing and begged him to write a universal prayer for Grandparents. As a practising Catholic, I felt as though I was failing my family because I was unable to pass on my faith. Some members of my family were rejecting it. I felt hurt and isolated; they wanted me for everything else, but not my faith.

No one believed that our Holy Father would ever write the prayer. I never doubted it. My mission was to ensure that he saw the request. I knew, absolutely, that once he did, he would not hesitate, and when he did, he summed it up perfectly. This beautiful prayer totally encapsulates the aims of the Catholic Grandparents Association. Please listen to his words.

Lord Jesus,
you were born of the Virgin Mary,
the daughter of Saints Joachim and Anne.

Look with love on Grandparents the world over.
Protect them! They are a source of enrichment
for families, for the Church and for all of society.

Support them! As they grow older,
may they continue to be for their families
strong pillars of Gospel faith,
guardians of noble domestic ideals,

living treasures of sound religious traditions.
Make them teachers of wisdom and courage,
that they may pass on to future generations the fruits
of their mature human and spiritual experience.

Lord Jesus,
help families and society
to value the presence and roles of Grandparents.
May they never be ignored or excluded,
but always encounter respect and love.
Help them to live serenely and to feel welcomed
in all the years of life which you give them.
Mary, Mother of all the living,
keep Grandparents constantly in your care,
accompany them on their earthly Pilgrimage,
and by your prayers, grant that all families
may one day be reunited in our heavenly homeland,
where you await all humanity
for the great embrace of life without end. Amen

Thank you, Holy Father for this beautiful prayer which has enabled and empowered so many Grandparents already. They desperately need this prayer to help restore their confidence and strengthen their faith. They need to be reassured that the Church is aware of their plight and is there to help them. They must be encouraged and supported to proclaim their faith, and fulfil their sacred obligation of passing on that faith. They need to be reminded that they are the natural evangelisers embedded in the heart of the family.

I have waited and prayed for an opportunity such as this one here today, to share this inspiring, comforting, prayer with Grandparents everywhere. Please take this prayer back to your countries, your parishes - share it far and wide. Hang it in your churches and pray it every day. This can be a very significant instrument for the New Evangelization which our Holy Father himself is constantly promoting.

When Cardinal Seán Brady launched the Catholic Grandparents Association in Knock, Ireland, in 2008, there were 14,000 Grandparents present all praying for their Grandchildren and their faith. Imagine the power of that prayer - 14,000 people united with the same aim and same goal - all wanting to do their best for their Grandchildren.

There are now Grandparents' Pilgrimages in England, Ireland, Scotland America, Australia, Tanzania, Cambodia, Nigeria to name but a few - and the word is spreading.

Last year, we had the opportunity to speak at the annual European Shrine Director's Conference. Without exception, every Shrine Director agreed to have a Grandparents' Pilgrimage starting in 2012. So there will be Pilgrimages in Slovenia, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Malta, Gibraltar, Fatima and Lourdes. We know that all of Europe needs to be re-evangelized and these Pilgrimages bring great hope and encouragement for the renewal of our Church.

We see this not as a success story, but as a significant move by the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit to meet the crisis which we all know exists; the crisis of handing on the faith and the vital role that Grandparents have to play in this. This is the central feature of all our Pilgrimages – to help Grandparents to pass on the faith.

The Pilgrimages have four major outcomes.

1. They provide a witness to the Church of the celebration of the vocation of Grandparents. 2. They provide an opportunity for mutual support, encouragement and relaxation. 3. They offer an important time for catechesis for Grandparents. 4. They confirm a sense of mission to develop evangelization within the family.

To coincide with the Pilgrimages, we have Children's Prayer Appeals. Grandchildren write thousands of beautiful prayers, pouring out their love for their Grandparents. These prayers are blessed at the Offertory of Pilgrimage Masses.

We organize Grandparents' Days in schools, bringing Grandparents and Grandchildren together. This is now a permanent fixture in every Primary School in Ireland during Catholic Schools Week

We organize Branches of the Catholic Grandparents Association in parishes with the blessing of the Bishop and the local Priests, so that Grandparents can come together without fear, shame or embarrassment to pray, share their joys and anxieties and help and support each other in the great task of passing on the faith. I have a dream that there will be a group of the Catholic Grandparents Association in every parish in every country, in the world.

Research shows there is an ever-increasing gap between Grandparents and Grandchildren regarding their knowledge of the faith. Grandparents have a firm knowledge and a firm commitment; whilst Grandchildren show an inadequate knowledge and therefore a decreasing commitment to it.

In 2007, The Iona Institute conducted a poll on levels of religious knowledge in Ireland which found that those aged between 15 and 24 frequently didn't know even the basics of the faith, the ABCs as it were.

For example, a third didn't know what the Church celebrates at Easter, or when Jesus was born; only half could name the Holy Trinity; less than half could name the first book of the Bible; only one in twenty knew the First Commandment; only 10 per cent could say what the Immaculate Conception is. So it is clear that our faith is not being handed down to the detriment of our Grandchildren.

Every single person here has it within their power to pass on some element of the faith to people in their lives, particularly Grandparents who have the care of Grandchildren during the day. You have a priceless opportunity to reach across the generations to try and plant a seed of faith.

Grandparents might imagine that they need to know a lot about theology to teach anything to their Grandchildren. You know it all already.. Children love Bible stories. Teach them to make the sign of the cross; say simple prayers with them - the Our Father, the Hail Mary; give simple explanations of what Christmas is, what Easter means; say Grace before meals even if they are not used to it; teach them bedtime prayers "Oh Angel of God". Use every opportunity to teach your Grandchildren to pray.

Help Parents in every possible way to make their home a holy place. Always support them - parents and children are under a lot of pressure these days.

When you are a parent, you want different things for your children - a good education, a good job, financial security. Grandparents have no such agenda. They want their Grandchildren to be good, decent human beings, to be able to make good decisions, to have values and to live good moral lives. If they go astray, they know there is a loving non-judgemental ever-forgiving God who is always waiting with open arms to welcome them home.

There is a unique bond of trust and love between Grandparents and Grandchildren. Very often you have a much better relationship with your Grandchildren than with your own children. Grandparents can make the most of this special bond, to show them the right way.

We live in unprecedeted times of broken and fragmented families with constantly changing social and moral values. Our children are under tremendous social pressure to follow the false Gods of personal freedom, immediate gratification, money and success. We do everything we can to support them even though, from time to time, there might be a conflict of ideals.

The modern world values freedom. It values individualism, But the Grandparents' generation, our generation, values community, commitment, and this extends above all else to our families. Personal happiness comes a distant second behind our responsibilities. We put duty first and rights second. So imagine what would happen if Grandparents went on strike? The whole world would collapse in a heap. Grandparents are absolutely vital.

Take a moment to ask yourselves where your values of duty, responsibility, self-sacrifice and loyalty come from? Well, one of the most important places they come from is the Church. This is why the Church is such a pillar of society and is why the scandals of late have been disastrous. If the Church is weakened, society is weakened. We need to build up the Kingdom of God on Earth. I'd go so far as to say, no group has a more important role to play in passing on the faith than Grandparents. .

The next ten years are vital. I feel my speaking at this conference marks the coming of age of the Catholic Grandparents Association. We feel we have the full support of the Church, and that we are recognised at the highest level as an organisation needed in this day and age. It is a privilege for us to serve the church and indeed to serve humanity in this vital task of passing on the faith, through our Pilgrimages and other activities.

I thank God for this opportunity. We feel that it is a mark of God's providence that we have been called upon to begin our major effort in Ireland at this time.

Our Catholic Faith has existed for more than 2000 years. It has been handed down from generation to generation. There is a real danger that we will be the generation - and by "we" I mean us, everybody alive today - that breaks the chain of faith, because we think it is up to somebody else to do it. We are the chosen ones. We must be the ones to pass it on. I ask you today to make a personal commitment to strengthen that chain.

We cannot be the generation that fails to pass our faith on.

Grandparents must to be given the confidence and means to ensure this happens. In fact, they need to be persuaded that in most cases they already possess the means, because they already know the basics of the faith and are living it out in their own lives. Their simple fidelity to the life of the Church, to the Sacraments and to daily prayer is their greatest testimony to their families.

Our desire now is to see this important movement - the Catholic Grandparents Association - embedded in the life of the local Church throughout the World. We call upon our Episcopal Conferences to ensure that the Grandparents' Vocation is acknowledged and celebrated at diocesan and parochial level. That the Vocation of Grandparents is nurtured by catechesis and forms part of pastoral plans. That the regional Shrines, particularly those dedicated to Our Lady, celebrate Grandparents' Pilgrimages and encourage their faithful to embrace and nurture this important work.

In the upcoming Year of "Faith", we humbly call upon our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, to help us once again, to lead a Grandparents' Pilgrimage in 2013 in Rome. To create a World Grandparents' Day, just like we have a World Youth Day, so that Grandparents everywhere can be mobilised - united in love and prayer, and support each other in the great task of passing on the faith.

This is the purpose of the Catholic Grandparents Association and the task could not be more important. This is why we would like to spread our message as far and wide as possible and see

the Association founded in as many countries as possible. It is in gatherings such as this that much can be accomplished.

The time is urgent and the need is great. We are all in this together and together we cannot fail. **Failure in this case is not an option. The legacy of the Catholic Grandparents Association is Eternity; we are leaving a footprint from this World to the next.**

The task is great and the timing is crucial. Our faith is not being handed down and we need to do something about it now. We have all done an enormous amount in our lifetimes but there is one incomparable job left to do and it is one from which you can never retire. Pass on your priceless gift of faith; we owe it to our grandchildren.

Thank you, may Saint Joachim and Saint Anne bless you, your children, and your grandchildren.

Speech to be given by,
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