



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 24nd Session of the Human Rights Council Items 2 & 3: Promotion
and protection of the human rights of older persons
Geneva, 13 September 2013

Mr. President,

My Delegation is grateful to the High Commissioner and to the Secretary General for their initiative to conduct a consultation with Member and Observer States, as well as civil society institutions, concerning the human rights situation and needs of older persons in today's society. The major challenges summarized by the High Commissioner, including the impact of the financial crisis on this population, high prevalence of poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness among them, poor access to needed social protection and services, as well as health care, and the increasing isolation, institutionalization and discrimination toward our senior members of the community cause my Delegation grave concern. These problems are certainly well known to the Catholic Church, which sponsors 17,223 homes for the elderly, chronically ill and disabled persons, located in every region of the world,¹ and a range of community-based psycho-social and pastoral services that aim to maintain these persons in their own homes and actively engaged in family and social life.

The population of older persons is growing; the number of younger people to assist with family-centred care is decreasing. The demographic trends cited by the High Commissioner detailed this reality. As a response, there seems to be a tendency toward "warehousing" older persons, thus depriving them of the place reserved for them in communal life. The wider population is thus deprived of the benefit that the lived experience and wisdom of these older members of the human community provide. The 2013 Report refers to the Public Consultation on this topic, and includes the claim that "a decision had to be made about how long this longevity could be harnessed" and that "[t]he challenges was to 'add life to years, not just years to life.'" My Delegation certainly believes that ageing persons need to be assured the highest quality of life possible. We also strongly promote the right to life from conception to natural death and therefore unconditionally oppose any attempts to end the lives of older persons simply because they can no longer assume the role of "contributing members of society" or because health care for this population entails rising costs. The dignity of persons remains always intact.

¹ "Catholic Church Statistics - 2012," Fides News Agency, 21 October 2012.

“... [O]ften society, dominated by the logic of efficiency and profit, does not welcome ... [longevity] as such; on the contrary, it often rejects it, considering the elderly as unproductive and useless ... However, the elderly are a source of wisdom and a great resource. The quality of a society, of a civilization, may also be judged by how it treats its elderly and by the place reserved for them in communal life.”²

Based on the data assembled and the expert testimonies gathered during the consultation process on this urgent issue, my Delegation would like to propose the following strategies in order to promote and to protect effectively the human rights of older persons:

1. *Affirm and preserve the social role of older persons.* This will necessitate a reflection on and development of more just and equitable policies aimed at re-defining the concept of social utility for those who have retired from the system of paid employment but who are quite capable and needed to strengthen the fabric of society through volunteer service and social presence as respected and learned members of families and communities.
2. *Keep older people engaged in decision-making about their lives and their social integration.* Often these decisions are relegated to others even when older persons are competent to decide and discern their best interest. Respect for their human dignity and rights requires that they be engaged in such decisions and that others take over responsibility for determining their care only when there is verified evidence that they are incapable of doing so.
3. *Promote social solidarity in relation to the challenges faced by older persons.* Often limitations in funding are used as an excuse to deprive older persons of the highest quality of life. Provisions for social solidarity must be given priority by governments and by the entire human family.
4. *Guarantee access to health care and to community-based care.* The high cost of hospital and nursing home care can often be avoided by reinforcing primary care and community-based support and by providing financial support to families to maintain older persons in their own homes.

Mr. President,

By giving due attention to the human rights of older persons and other related human rights the positive and constructive presence of older persons in society is valued. A binding instrument on the promotion and protection of all these rights would reinforce them and would make the international community accountable for their implementation. Contrary to the common stereotypes, older persons are an enrichment of society because of their experience and maturity, and they help us to see human affairs with greater wisdom.

² Pope Benedict XVI, during visit to Home for the Elderly, Rome, 12 November 2012, <http://www.news.va/en/news/to-give-space-to-the-elderly-is-to-give-space-to-l>