



Presentation by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 30th Session of the Human Rights Council
Item 3: Independent Expert on the Rights of Older Persons
Geneva, 16 September 2015

Mr. President,

My Delegation would like to thank the Independent Expert for her Report on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons.

Nowadays the world is aging at a faster rate as is witnessed by the 900 million people over the age of 60. Forecasts predict that, at the increased rate of 3.26 % per year, the number of persons over sixty in the world will reach 1.4 billion by 2030 and 2.1 billion by 2050.¹ The so-called “population ageing” phenomenon presents for the International Community not only a challenge but an opportunity: to recognize the improvements made in health care access and quality of life and the contribution that older persons can make in our society.

In a rapidly changing social and technological environment, older persons are often set aside, discriminated or even abandoned due to the current *throw away culture* which considers them as “persons who do not produce anymore”. These persons are becoming victimized through increased forms of violence and exploitation. We should bear in mind, as Pope Francis warns, that “the elder is not an alien. We are that elder: in the near or far future, but inevitably, even if we don’t think it. And if we don’t learn how to treat the elder better, that is how we will be treated.”² There is a duty to care for the elderly: “The quality of a society, [...] of a civilization, is also judged by how it treats elderly people and by the place it gives them in community life.”³ “Attention to the elderly makes the difference in a civilization... This civilization will move forward if it knows how to respect wisdom, the wisdom of the elderly. In a civilization in which there is no room for the elderly or where they are thrown away because they create problems, this society carries with it the virus of death.”⁴

¹ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, available on esa.un.org.

² Pope Francis, General Audience, Saint Peter’s Square, Wednesday 4 March 2015, Catechesis on the Family – Grandparents.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

It must be remembered that the caring of older persons is the primary responsibility of the family itself. This crucial role should not be undermined, discarded or taken for granted. Indeed, the State and its agencies cannot replace the family, but only have a subsidiarity role. Sons and daughters, nephews and nieces and grandchildren are the first ones who must care for their older relatives.

Today, more than ever, the family is under stress to care for their elderly members. This is due, in large part, to the transformation of work relationships, the reduction of the size of families, the increased mobility and distance between relatives and the desire of older persons to live separately from their sons and daughters. For this reason, the family network must be seen as the main recipient of aid and public action so that it can be helped to fulfil its duties in caring for the elderly.

As often stated during the Madrid process,⁵ a change of perspective is needed. Older persons should not be seen as passive actors, mere recipients of care, but active and full members of society. Their positive contributions to society are many: they are guardians of culture and knowledge, educators, volunteers. They also play a pivotal role in family life in caring for their children and grandchildren.

Our Delegation would like to recall the fact that the elderly are often mistreated, discarded with an attitude of abandonment as if their dignity and value were determined by their productivity or state of health. Such an attitude is the result of a utilitarian mentality which places economic interests before the dignity of the human person. Rather, the inherent value of the human person requires us to respect life in all its stages, even in its most vulnerable moments, until natural death.

Mr President,

The International Community is called “to patiently build a more diverse, more welcoming, more humane, more inclusive society that does not need to discard those who are weak in body and mind. On the contrary we need a society which measures its success on how the weak are cared for.”⁶

Thank you, Mr President.

⁵ The Open-ended Working Group on Ageing and the Independent Expert on Older Persons.

⁶ Meeting of the Pope with the elderly, Address of Pope Francis, Saint Peter’s Square, Sunday, 28 September 2014.