



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič  
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the UN and Other International Organizations in Geneva  
at the Interactive Dialogue on Human Rights - 33<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council  
Item 3 - Independent Expert on the Rights of Older Persons  
Geneva, 14 September 2016

Mr. President,

My Delegation is grateful for the Report of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons. As presented in the Report, the population of older persons represents the fastest growing segment of the global population. “By 2050, for the first time, there will be more older persons than children under the age of 15 worldwide, and it is projected that the number of older persons will more than double from 900 million currently to nearly 2 billion”. In a world that is living a critical demographic transformation the elderly face a number of particular challenges in the enjoyment of their human rights that need to be addressed urgently. The major challenges summarized by the Independent Expert in the area of health care, the right to work, social protection, access to justice, violence and abuse, the participation of older persons, and their increasing discrimination, represent a grave concern for the Holy See.

One of the most pressing challenges to the welfare of older persons is poverty, including their often inadequate living conditions. As highlighted in the Report, “Poverty and lack of income security constitute major concerns for many older persons. Social transfers, in particular adequate pensions, significantly contribute to ensuring the financial security of older persons and are a suitable means of reducing the at-risk-of-poverty rate, their vulnerability and social exclusion”. Pensions are essential to ensuring rights, dignity and income security for older persons. The right to income security in old age, as grounded in human rights instruments and international labour standards, includes the right to an adequate pension. However, “nearly half of all people over pensionable age do not receive a pension. For many of those who do receive a pension, pension levels are not adequate.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, most of the world’s older women and men have no income security, have no right to retire and have to continue working as long as they can – often with poor remuneration and in precarious conditions. Yet, despite lower income levels, older persons may be the main providers for the household and the primary caregivers, including for the care of grandchildren and other members of the family.

Mr. President,

In a society often dominated by the logic of efficiency and profit, the elderly can easily be considered unproductive and useless. Several States have recognized the relatively low standard of living among older persons as compared to other segments of the population, including the prevalence of poverty, and even extreme poverty.

In the sector of health care, older patients are usually discharged with complex medical problems, high stress and vulnerability, and these factors place the elderly at risk for poor outcomes. Transitional care, such as a discharge planning programmes, facilitates the care process from

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_310211.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_310211.pdf)

hospital to home. The sustainable access to health care can be realized through stronger policies in strengthening the primary care and by helping families, even to financial subsidies, to take care of parents at home.

Older people have a wealth of skills and experiences, they have lived through situations others cannot even imagine, and yet we continue to dismiss these lifetimes of experiences when they begin to need care and support and instead people become a list of care needs. On a macro level, older people contribute financially to society and to the workplace, and at a local level, they contribute to their communities and individual networks in terms of experience. They have also contributed for many decades which is often forgotten. In the Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002), States have foreseen the human right of older persons to participate in all aspects of society, highlighting the rights to work, to health, to independence and to accessibility. Consistent with the Madrid Plan of Action, the Holy See considers of utmost importance to *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. Making cities inclusive of older persons means generating opportunities for their economic and social participation in accessible and safe environments. It also means providing affordable housing as well as the basic health and social services needed to support ageing in place. 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.

As stated by Pope Francis a society that does not take care of the elderly has no future. “The elderly are those who transmit history to us, who transmit doctrine, who transmit the faith and give it to us as an inheritance.”<sup>2</sup> The Holy See considers essential *the promotion of policies and systems of education that propose an alternative approach to the dominant “throw-away culture” that judges human beings simply by what they produce*. So often, the elderly feel useless and alone because they have lost their proper place in society.

Mr. President, living longer must never be seen as an exception, a burden or a challenge, but rather it must be recognized as the blessing that it is. Older persons enrich society and their positive and constructive presence in society is valued. 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. Existing arrangements to protect the human rights of older persons are inadequate and dedicated measures to strengthen the international protection regime are required. Bearing in mind the General Assembly Resolution 67/139 of 20 December 2012 about the need to strengthen the protection of the human rights of older persons, the Holy See wishes that the existing divergences will be soon overcome, given the millions of older persons waiting for their human rights to become a reality.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Homily of Pope Francis in the Chapel of *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 19 November 2013 (cfr. *L’Osservatore Romano*, Wednesday, 20 November 2013).