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Old Age: Blessing or Burden? Pastoral Care of Older Adults from an Orthodox Priest's Perspective

Abstract

Old age is laden with problems. Older adults are treated with prejudice. Prejudice inevitably leads to discrimination, and discrimination leads to unequal treatment of older people by the press, youth, and society. How can a Christian, a priest, and, more generally, the living Church help pastorally older adults? Is old age really problematic, and therefore wasted? Does it have anything meaningful and important to offer to the social and ecclesiastical space?

Is it worth dealing pastorally with an older person's problems or not? Should the Church be concerned if it includes in its pastoral ministry the appropriate diakonia of its elderly members? What can an elderly person offer to the younger members of the church community? Is it a waste of



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precious time and a loss of significant spiritual and physical powers to ministry to the elderly? It will be shown that Old Age does indeed have a lot to offer both itself and the younger ages. The pastoral care of older adults is extremely necessary since every man is a special child of God, regardless of age.

Keywords

Ageism, old age, Pastoral ministry, priest, stereotype, voluntarism

1 The reality of “Old Age”

Old age or senility is a complex procedure. While it is relatively easy for someone to give a satisfactory definition of the concept of old age, there are nevertheless difficulties in trying to define the calendar start of old age. From a medical and biological point of view, ageing is defined as the evolution of cell inversion and degeneration, with a progressive reduction in cell proliferation capacity, which leads the body from birth to death.¹ The term “aging” describes the 'getting old' process.² This is an irreversible process, which begins immediately with the birth of man. What are the criteria for classifying someone as old?³

¹ Giannis S. Hatziantoniou, *Psychopathology of the Third Age* (Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 2005), p. 12.

² L. G. Pankow, J.M. Solotoroff, “Biological Aspects and Theories of Aging”, in J. A. Blackburn, C. N. Dulmus (ed.), *Handbook of Gerontology* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007), p. 19.

³ Ulrike Marwedel, *Gerontology and Gerontopsychiatry* (Athens: European Technology Publications, 2009), p. 18.

The safest criterion for characterizing someone as old is age. However, subjective difficulties arise; for a ten-year-old child, a student already seems old enough, but also for an eight-year-old man, the seventy-year-old seems young. Isn't the 70-year-old man considered an older man? Because each human organism ages at a different rate, age is insufficient as the sole criterion. This led to the introduction of the terms primary and secondary old age.⁴

Primary old age refers only to the physiological and internal functions of biological aging. These functions lead to inevitable biological changes, which will certainly occur in every human organism, despite the existence of good health and the absence of diseases. Primary old age is universal, does not appear suddenly but gradually forms begins after physical and reproductive maturity, and leads to death.

Secondary old age refers only to pathological changes resulting from external factors. These factors can be the beneficial or harmful habits of a person, which help or burden his body. Important is the role of human personality as well as the appearance of diseases.⁵

An impression is caused by the fact that the Bible accurately determines the average of the human age at seventy to eighty years. It is written in the book of Psalms that "Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty if our strength endures".⁶

Most scientists accept the internationally prevailing aspect that the age of sixty-five, which is the same as the age of retirement and the end of active social contribution, is the time limit for registering persons belonging to the old age. This view is

⁴ Anastasia Efklidi, "Old age and health," in Anastasia Kostaridou-Efklidi (ed.) *Geriatrics and Gerontology Issues* (Athens: Pedio, 2011), p. 71.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 72-73.

⁶ *Ps.* 89.10.

reinforced by the point of view of the international medical community, according to which every patient over the age of sixty-five is classified and treated as geriatric.⁷

The science dealing with the ageing process, Gerontology, makes an additional distinction between "third" and "fourth" age, between "old" and "oldest old". Those over the age of 80 are considered to be oldest old. The word Gerontology comes from the composition of two ancient Greek words, *γέρων* (old) and *λόγος* (science, knowledge). Therefore, Gerontology is the science that systematically investigates the multiple aspects of old age, dealing with physical, mental and social changes in old age, assisted for this purpose by other sciences. Because of its connection with other sciences, Gerontology is characterized as interdisciplinary science. In medical science there are two branches, Geriatrics, which deals with the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases of old age and Gerontopsychiatry, which investigates the respective mental diseases. In Sociology there is the branch of Gerontosociology, which studies the importance of social developments in the lives of the elderly and the oldest old as well as their participation in social changes. In Psychology there is the branch of Gerontopsychology, which observes how the personality of man evolves in his senile age and how the elderly experience and accept the negative events of life.⁸

Several factors contribute to the rapid increase in old age. Above all, mortality in Europe, Asia, America has decreased significantly in recent years, due to improved living and hygiene conditions as well as the provision of high-quality medical

⁷ A. Gregoriadou, A. Pigadas, I. Dardavesis, B. Katsougiannopoulos, "Maturation and ageing of the Greek population," *Greek Medicine*, 57 (1991), pp. 126-132.

⁸ Ulrike Marwedel, *Gerontology and Gerontopsychiatry*, pp. 17-18.

services to more and more people, regardless of age. Subsequently, the rise of the socio-economic and cultural level with the comforts and improvements of life. Perhaps the most important factor, which disrupts the structural population fabric of Western civilization (and unfortunately its contribution is overlooked), is the excessively high number of abortions, which deprive the country of the young population.

Nowadays the European continent, as well as the other developed countries, are experiencing a severe “*grey revolution*”. In Europe the fastest growing segment of the population is the one that exceeds sixty years of age. At the same time, the number of deaths exceeded the number of births in all European countries, resulting in an increasing decline in the young population. Demographic ageing is the new nightmare of the developed world. According to U.N. data, from 1975 to 2050, the number of people over the age of sixty will increase five times, while the population of those over the age of eighty will increase seven times.⁹

The U.N. has established a criterion for classifying a country as “new.” According to this criterion, a country is classified as ‘new’ when the proportion of the elderly is less than 4% of the general population, ‘mature’ when it is up to 7% and ‘old’ when the elderly exceeds 7%.¹⁰ In Greece for example, the proportion of the elderly is 22%!!! (2019) of the general population, making the country an over-aged country.¹¹

⁹ Ioannis Dardavesis, “Introductory elements of Geriatrics and Gerontology,” in Anastasia Kostaridou-Efklidi (ed.) *Geriatrics and Gerontology Issues*, (Athens: Pedio, 2011), p. 33.

¹⁰ M. Violaki-Paraskevas, “Medical and social consideration of old age, in G. N. Christodoulou, B. P. Kontaxakis, (ed.), *The Third Age*, (Athens: Beta, 2000), p. 18.

¹¹ B. Kotzamanis, “Demographic ageing, challenge or threat?,” *Demographic News* 38 (2020), p. 2.

2 **Old Age facing stereotypes and prejudices**

The sympathetic and creative period of old age is unfortunately stigmatized by stereotypes and prejudices, which are far from responding to reality. We reproduce these stereotypes in the conversations we have, even in our jokes. By saying "stereotype", we refer to the symbolic character attributed to members of a group of people and based on arbitrary generalizations.¹² This tendency to characterize a group of people, without looking at their individual differences, is offensive and creates a climate of racism, social isolation and devaluation.

Stereotypes about old age usually have a negative connotation. The paradox is that even in positive stereotypes, this negative connotation remains, but older people can benefit from them. The stereotype, for example, that all older people are poor works positively for them, since this ensures an increase in State aid.¹³ Looking at some of these stereotypes we will notice that they are just myths, superficial truths as well as creations of imagination and ignorance.

(a) Older adults are not productive. The stereotype, which ends up being a myth, refers to the inability of older people to be lifelong students and therefore counterproductive and a burden on society. An elderly person can assimilate new knowledge (computer use, Internet, smartphones, etc.), not as quickly as a younger person, but his experience covers youthful elasticity.¹⁴ As to whether the elderly is counterproductive, one has nothing but to look around and will see countless elderly people form the

¹² George Babinotis, *Dictionary of the New Greek Language, second edition*, (Athens: Center of Lexicology, 2002), p. 1652.

¹³ Joseph R. Rogers, *Ministering to the seniors* (USA: Lexington KY, 2012), p. 77.

¹⁴ James Houston, Michael Parker, *A Vision for the Aging Church* (USA: IVP Academic, 2011), p. 115.

soul of society. Bishops, priests, missionaries, great artists, writers, politicians, doctors, business executives, university professors, demonstrate the ability of the elderly to learn and supply productively.

(b) Older adults are vulnerable and sick. The stereotype states that the elderly is sick, weak, disabled and abandoned in nursing homes; in 2003 only 5% of older people over the age of 65 received long-term medical treatment in hospitals or other hospitals worldwide.¹⁵ The number is trending downward; in 1982 it was 6.2%.¹⁶ After all, we all notice that most of the elders are not only sick and abandoned in nursing homes, but are in good health. Now in this century it is possible to combine long-term life with fewer diseases. This leads not only to adding years to our lives but also life in our years.¹⁷ This stereotype tends towards the truth only when we refer to ages over 85, where time limits begin to narrow hopelessly.

(c) Older adults are lonely, depressed, sad and isolated from society. It is arbitrarily claimed that an old person is isolated and does not care for society, so that society pushes him to the margins; even king David back in the Old Testament age had this fear of rejection and isolation, "Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone".¹⁸ Depression and loneliness can knock on the door of any age and not just the old age. It is established that the majority of older people today demonstrate high rates of contact with their families, neighbors and friends, so the power of this stereotype (which is also the

¹⁵ Richards H. Gentzler, *Aging and Ministry in the 21st Century* (Nashville TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008), p.17.

¹⁶ James Houston & Michael Parker, *ibid*, p. 117.

¹⁷ J. W. Rowe, R. L. Kahn, *Successful Aging* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), p. 18.

¹⁸ *Ps.* 70.9.

most offensive for aged people) weakens and ends up being an imaginative myth.¹⁹

These stereotypes are adopted by most people arbitrarily and recklessly. It is thus believed that all older people are all the same, they are an unbearable financial burden on their families and the state's insurance funds, they have asexual behavior, and they are an easy target for criminals. The role of television and cinema in the spread of these stereotypes is also very negative. The elderly characters featured in films and TV shows are not the philosophers of our time, nor the wise and the intellectuals. Older people are displayed as sick, lazy, they don't understand a lot of things, they don't care about anything, grumble and mutter all the time.²⁰

The paradox is that these stereotypes are accepted by the majority of society. Acceptance of stereotypes necessarily leads to the creation of enforced rules (norms) and the rules leads in age prejudice (ageism). Age prejudice, ageism, is the systematic discrimination against people due to their old age is, similar to racism and sexism, which refer to skin color and gender respectively. ²¹Age discrimination is the worst and hardest form

¹⁹ Department of Communities, *Child Safety and Disability Services, Ageing- Myth and Reality*, (Australia: Queensland Government, 2012), p. 26.

²⁰ Joan Chittister, *The Gift of Years-Growing Older Gracefully*, (New York: Blue Bridge, 2008), p. 22.

²¹ Robert Butler, *Growing Old in America-Why Survive?*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 10. The author, physician and first director of the department of geriatric medicine in America, first used the term "ageism» in his book above, which also won the prize Pulitzer. According to Butler, he heard an American pastor mention that his church community consisted of three categories: almost go (new generation), slow go (middle-aged) and No go (elderly). Butler, setting aside negative stereotypes, found out that the third category, the No go, in fact they were moving (did indeed go) and offered a lot to the local parish with its prayer and experience.

of rejection an elderly person can suffer.²² It affects not only the life of older adults but also the lives of younger people, since the power of ageism is enormous.

Unfortunately, this age discrimination also exists in the way of life and organization of the Church, especially the parish life since ageism virus affects more and more Christians. Older people, although in excellent physical and mental condition, are nevertheless considered inadequate and inferior, compared to younger members, simply because they are aged.²³

The chief of every local church, parish, church organization, obviously influenced by negative stereotypes, prefers in parish assemblies, in Holy Bible assemblies, in speeches, a young audience, rather than an old one. Priests often rejoice in the youthful congregation and resent the old, saying the well-known cliché- stereotype, that parishes have been overrun by the elderly and are in danger of being erased; They forget the fact that Christ is the same for young and old people. It is inevitable that stereotypes lead to fear of old age, to gerophobia (a fear of aging).²⁴ Grey hair and wrinkles cause repulsion and repugnance.

3 Priest's pastoral ministry for the elderly

The center and soul of the parish pastoral ministry is definitely the priest-pastor of each church congregation, always assisted by his lay collaborators. Every priest must struggle spiritually for

²² Angus Jocelyn, Patricia Reeve, "Ageism: A Threat to 'Aging Well' in the 21st Century," *Journal of Applied Gerontology* 25 (2006), p. 139.

²³ Win Arn, Charles Arn, *Catch the Age Wave-A Handbook for Effective Ministry with Senior Adults*, (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1999), p. 48.

²⁴ Joseph R. Rogers *ibid*, p. 77.

his personal sanctification. The word of St. Gregory the Theologian will always be timeless: "You ought to be sanctified in order to sanctify others".²⁵ The absence of a personal spiritual sanctification entails pastoral failure and pastoral damage for the priest and also for his parishioners.

The reading of the Bible and the works of Church's Fathers is essential for the priest's personal sanctification. Unfortunately, there are priests who never study the Holy Bible. Big pastoral mistake. Also, the participation in the sacred Mystery of Repent and Confession sanctifies the priest and can transmit this sanctification to his flock and thus to his elderly parishioners.²⁶ Unfortunately, it is established that many priests do not confess their sins!²⁷ They thus lack the grace of this godly-given mystery, while at the same time repelling their guilt to the unconscious, which then takes its revenge, since according to the famous psychiatrist-psychotherapist Carl Young, "whatever is thrown in the unconscious is avenged". The unconfessed and repulsed in unconscious sins and guilts are not only been erased but acquire independence and autonomy in the space of the unconscious and dominate the personality of the priest, without realizing it. This dominance of repulsive guilt is expressed with aggression and neurotic behavior towards the fellow humans.²⁸

²⁵ Γρηγόριος ο Θεολόγος, *Απολογητικός τῆς εἰς τόν Πόντον φυγῆς, Λόγος Β΄*, PG 35, 480 "Καθαρθῆναι δεῖ πρῶτον, εἶτα καθᾶραι· σοφισθῆναι, καὶ οὕτω σοφίσαι· γενέσθαι φῶς, καὶ φωτίσαι· ἐγγίσει Θεῶ, καὶ προσαγαγεῖν ἄλλους· ἀγιασθῆναι, καὶ ἀγιάσαι".

²⁶ *Jas.*, 5, 16 "So confess your sins to one another and pray for one another to be cured".

²⁷ Μητροπολίτης Αργολίδος κ. Νεκτάριος, "Τυπολογία Εξομολογουμένων και δημιουργία Εξομολογητικής Συνείδησης" in π. Αδ. Αυγουστίδης (ed.), *Εξομολογητική-Το Μυστήριο της Μετανοίας στην Ποιμαντική Θεολογία*, (Αθήνα: ΙΠΕ, 2018³), p. 180.

²⁸ Ioannis Kornarakis, *Confessional Courses*, (Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis, 2017), p. 112.

This explains the aggressive attitude of many priests towards their parishioners. This proves that these priests either never confess their sins or if they confess them, they deny simultaneously their personal responsibility for these sins. If there had been an honest confession, many diversions would have been prevented in their early stages. The acceptance of personal guilt and the confession of sin in the confessor, humbles the priest and then easily approaches God, who finds shelter only on humble people, for he is humble Himself.

The shepherd's personal spiritual struggle for sanctification certainly includes his effort to be educated. Because certainly in his pastoral work, apart from theological questions, he will be called upon to face philosophical, moral, psychological and social questions or problems, he must always be prepared and prepared because otherwise he will be disappointed and will dominate his mental world feelings of inadequacy and failure, which will surely convey to his family environment. Basic knowledge of psychology, pedagogy and philosophy is essential. The studious priest can more easily deal with his personal, family and parish problems. A brilliant example of such studiousness was Saint Porphyrios the Kapsokalyvite (1906-1991), who, although he had grammatical knowledge of the second grade of Primary school, nevertheless attended, as a listener, courses in Athens Medical School (in parallel with the other books he studied), in order to be able to serve the fellow man more effectively especially the sick and sad one.²⁹

The priest, in addition to being an officer of God's mysteries, is also a deacon of God's word. This ministry is considered necessary for the performance of his pastoral work since

²⁹ Γέροντος Πορφυρίου Κασσοκαλυβίτου, *Βίος και Λόγοι*, (Χανιά: Ι. Μ. Χρυσοπηγής, 2007⁸), p. 135.

without teaching and preaching³⁰ it is impossible for someone to believe in Christ.³¹ Holy Canons of the Church impose severe penalties on bishops or priests who neglects the diakonia of preaching the Word of God. The didactic priest will certainly present in his sermons and homilies the value and importance of old age, in the ecclesiastical and social environment. The priest can also organize study classes, excursions, celebrations, honorary events, exclusively for his elderly parishioners.

In addition to his liturgical and teaching diaconia, however, the priest also has an important social and charitable work to perform.³² The priest is obliged to know his parishioners by name and lead them safely to salvation.³³ For this purpose, so-called pastoral visits are necessary by the priest. With these visits the priest will see his elderly parishioners up close, not only in their natural space, in their homes, but also in the nursing home or wherever they may live.

The priest can't be locked up in a faceless office, trapped in the pitiful selfish isolation that requires "those who want me let's come and find me."³⁴ The priest cannot be unconcerned about his elderly parishioners, since old people are growing rapidly and form an important part of his flock (the most populous). He

³⁰ *1 Tim.* 3.2, "That is why the presiding elder must have an impeccable character. Husband of one wife, he must be temperate, discreet and courteous, hospitable and a good teacher".

³¹ *Rom.*, 10.14, "How then are they to call on him if they have not come to believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard of him? And how will they hear of him unless there is a preacher for them?".

³² Γεώργιος Μεταλληνός, *Δοκίμια Ορθόδοξης Μαρτυρίας*, (Αθήνα: Άθως, 2001), p. 103.

³³ *Jn.* 10. 3-4, "...the sheep hear his voice, one by one he calls his own sheep and leads them out. When he has brought out all those that are his, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his voice".

³⁴ Αιμιλιανός Τιμιάδης, Μητρ. Σηλυβρίας, *Ιερεύς, Ενορία και Ανανέωση-Σύγχρονες Ποιμαντικές Προκλήσεις*, (Αίγιο: Ι. Μ. Αιγαλείας, 2006), p. 221.

must visit them regularly and incessantly and be aware of the problems, needs and interests of the elderly of his parish.³⁵ Before each pastoral visit the priest must do two important things. Above all, he needs fervent prayer in order to share with God his anguish and pain for his elderly parishioners. Then a careful compensation needs to be made for the consequences and costs that a pastoral visit can cause.³⁶ There will certainly be a cost in time, which is valuable, maybe even in money (he may travel by his car), but surely a pastoral visit will evoke several emotions (joy, excitement, sadness, disappointment about possible rejection or inability to solve problems).³⁷

Pastoral visit to the elderly provides the priest with a unique opportunity to exert spiritual influence on them, strengthen them and lead them to Christ, whether they deny Christ or have poor knowledge of Him. The priest must accept the elderly as they are, accepting all the dystopies of their character, because otherwise they can very easily be offended, thus shattering the foundations of trust towards the priest and the Church. The priest from the very first visit must emphasize to his elderly parishioner that he prays for them in every Divine Liturgy. It is good and necessary for the priest to speak to every elderly person by his first name, to always speak positively to him, to be a good listener, since many elderly people feel the need to be heard by someone because they are lonely or socially isolated. The priest during his visit must not be dour and sad but he has

³⁵ Richard H. Gentzler Jr., *Older Adult Ministry*, (Nashville TN: Discipleship Resources, 2006), p. 18.

³⁶ See *Lk.*, 14.28, “And indeed, which of you here, intending to build a tower, would not first sit down and work out the cost to see if he had enough to complete it?”.

³⁷ David P. Gallacher, *Senior Adult Ministry in the 21st century*, (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006), p. 39.

to smile and laugh and certainly to use the joke pastorally, because most older people like jokes.³⁸

A focal point in the pastoral approach of the elderly is the pastor's attempt to gain the trust of his elderly parishioners. Trust is earned when the pastor prays warmly and has complete confidence in his Lord Jesus Christ. Then he can gain the trust of even the most wayward old man, since " Things that are impossible by human resources, are possible for God".³⁹ Trust is also earned when the pastor shows a real interest in the elderly (the elderly person immediately perceives it, as does the false interest), when he is not curious and when he is confidential (everyone has a secret they want to share).

After the priest has known well his elderly parishioners and gained their trust, he must proceed to the next step, to help them in their spiritual exertion. We have no right to conceal the word of God. The priest will emphasize the importance of the Church's holy mysteries for the salvation of man and the overcoming of death; many elderly people do not repent and do not confess or confess poorly; confession of an elderly man is not a simple matter because he thinks unilaterally and capriciously and easily falls into nagging and self-pity. The pastor-confessor should accept him as he would accept his parents, honor him and not despise him; The spiritual will be forced to endure the prolixity, bitterness, many old stories and sins that the old man will recite.

⁴⁰ The priest will wait very patiently and when he takes the floor, he will talk about the saving work of Christ, about his donations, about the value of prayer, about the death and immortality of the

³⁸ Ibid, p. 138.

³⁹ *Lk.*, 18.27.

⁴⁰ Άγγελος Νησιώτης, *Ο Πνευματικός και το έργο του*, (Αθήνα: Αποστολική Διακονία, 1959), p. 47.

soul, about the need for repentance and the need for frequent Holy Communion.

These pastoral visits benefit not only the elderly but also the priest himself, who elevates in the eyes of his parishioners for the zeal and interest he shows, so that everyone waits with pleasure for his visit, ignoring the unjustified prejudices that unfortunately prevail.⁴¹

The priest also shows his interest in his elderly parishioners when he adapts the holy temple and the ancillary facilities to the needs of the elderly. The construction of a ramp for wheelchairs, the existence of handles on the stairs, parking for the helpless, easy access to a toilet, adequate lighting, the existence of a heating and cooling system, the easy opening and closing of doors are important. The absence or dysfunction of the above reveal indifference and disrespect for the elderly, received by them with feelings of sadness and disappointment.

4 The useful contribution of the elderly to the parish diakonia

The Holy Bible presents the blessings and gifts of God to the elderly.⁴² Although old age is the last stage of life, in Old

⁴¹ Of course, this is the unacceptable and completely strange to the Orthodox Christian spirit, according to which a visit by a priest to a patient's home also entails the imminent arrival of death in that house.

⁴² *Deut.*, 32.7 “Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you”, *Prov.*, 7.6 “Children’s children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children”, *Ps.*, 91. 12-15 “The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, “The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him”.

Testaments books old age is considered a blessing and a gift of God. In no way is it rejected or considered useless.⁴³ After all, the eternal God is also characterized as "Ancient of days",⁴⁴ thus showing that old age is identified as eternity. Many great promises and blessings of God to the people of old age are great. God, in the Old Testament, promises the elderly that they will be respected and honored by all: "Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man, and fear thy God: I am the Lord".⁴⁵

Because God has no human thought and logic, that's why He can call a righteous man on a mission when he's old, as happened with Moses and Aaron: "And Moses was fourscore years old, and Aaron fourscore and three years old, when they spake unto Pharaoh".⁴⁶ This call of God can transcend the individual field and extend to a multitude of elders whose heart belong only to their beloved God: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions".⁴⁷

In the epistles of the apostle Paul there are a number of references directed at elderly persons. Paul himself, after all, describes himself as an old man.⁴⁸ In his epistle to the Church of Rome, Paul praises Abraham's great faith, despite his excessive age: "And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own

⁴³ Dee Ann Klapp, D. Min, *Biblical Foundations for a Practical Theology of Aging*, *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 15:1-2 (2003), p. 70.

⁴⁴ *Dan.*, 7. 9.

⁴⁵ *Lev.*, 19. 32.

⁴⁶ *Exod.*, 77.

⁴⁷ *Joel* 2.28.

⁴⁸ *Phlm.*, 1. 9 "Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ".

body now dead, when he was about a hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb".⁴⁹

Specific instructions on the attitude of members of the first Christian communities towards the elderly are addressed by Paul in his pastoral epistles. Older people need care and comfort, not observations and suggestions.⁵⁰ In his epistle to Titus, Paul mentions the obligations of older members of the communities to enable them to be respected. Older men must be faithful, patient, sober, modest and kind, spreading love everywhere. Similarly, for older women, Paul's instructions are more, perhaps because they are more susceptible to aberration. Instructions are given, mainly of a moral nature (modesty, abstinence from drunkenness, purity, temperance, obedience, conjugal faith), because their breach offends the community and causes irreparable scandal.⁵¹

It is obvious that in the books of the New Testament elder people are respected not only by their families but also by the church members. Abandoning elderly parents equates to infidelity.⁵² Christ himself, although he did not reach old age, even at the time

⁴⁹ *Rom.*, 4.19

⁵⁰ *1 Tim.*, 5.1-2 "Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren; The elder women as mothers; the younger as sisters, with all purity".

⁵¹ *Tit.*, 2. 2-5 "That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed".

⁵² *1 Tim.*, 5.8 "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel".

of his crucifixion, showed a touching interest in his mother, whom his beloved disciple John took care of her.⁵³

The Church Fathers also emphasize the importance and uniqueness of old age, but when it is connected to faith, temperance and wisdom.⁵⁴ Neither old age is supposedly identified with wisdom, nor youth with folly. Nothing works mechanically in the Church. If one looks at the congregation of any holy temple, he will note very easily that the majority of it consists of believers of old age. This fact is even put forward in a negative way, describing the Church as declining and old, having lost its effect in younger generations. Supporters of this view arbitrarily underestimate old age and over-emphasize the advantages of other ages, not realizing that each age has absolute utilitarian value and not relative.

The absolute value of old age is demonstrated by its great usefulness in the ecclesiastical space. One only has to live the life of the Church up close and find that the elderly are the mainstay and the soul of the Church. Many of the patriarchs, archbishops, bishops, priests have entered old age chronologically, abbots of holy monasteries, monks, nuns, catechists and lay volunteers; all of them display an admirable energy that humanly does not match to their old age. The elderly keeps the flame of faith unscathed and pass it on to the next generations. Most older people have amazing talents, gifts and abilities that allow them to contribute efficiently to the Church.

⁵³ *Jn.*, 19:27 “Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home”.

⁵⁴ Ιωάννης ο Χρυσόστομος, *Εἰς Ἑβραίους ὁμιλία Ζ'*, PG 63, 64-65, «ἡ δὲ ψυχὴ ἐν γῆρα ῥώννυται, μᾶλλον τότε ἀκμάζει, τότε γαιροῦται... οὕτω καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ ἐν νεότητι μὲν οὐσα πυρέττει, καὶ δόξης αὐτὴν ἔρος κατέχει μάλιστα καὶ τρυφῆς καὶ ἀφροδισίων καὶ πολλῶν ἄλλων φαντασιῶν· τοῦ δὲ γήρως αὐτῆ ἐπελθόντος, πάντα ταῦτα ἀπελαύνεται τὰ πάθη, τὰ μὲν διὰ τὸν καιρὸν, τὰ δὲ διὰ τὴν φιλοσοφίαν».

The most vital contribution of the elderly to the ecclesiastical space is the voluntary work they offer. By volunteering the elderly feel they are necessary, set new goals after their retirement by redefining the course of their lives and they do not give up just waiting for the coming of death.⁵⁵ Voluntary work is richly offered by the elderly, especially in the social work of the Church (rations, meals, charity funds etc.). However, it is necessary to be methodized a more active participation of the elderly in the pastoral work of the Church. It is an opportunity for the Church and for the elderly to develop pastoral ministry to the fullest. The elderly can be used more adequately in pastoral visits to hospitals, in the care of the needy elderly, in the support of abused elderly people, in the creation of Bible study courses exclusively for the elderly. It is not meant pastoral care for the elderly without pastoral care *from* and *for* the elderly.

The center of ecclesiastical volunteering is the parish, while the soul and mentor of this ministry is the priest of any local parish. All parish actions are based on parishioners' voluntarism.

The Church must, in the context of volunteering, activate the elderly, methodically and with a program, since this age class is the fastest growing not only in Greece but also worldwide. Much can be offered by the elderly in the parish ministry. It is found that the elderly is a living part of the parish and this can be seen from their financial contribution through their touching donations. The highest percentage of donations to the Church comes from elderly people.⁵⁶ The elderly are willing volunteers in every parish activity and even come first with joy and selflessness.

⁵⁵ Harold G. Koenig and Andrew J. Weaver, *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, (USA: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 59.

⁵⁶ Richard H. Gentzler Jr., *Older Adult Ministry*, p. 30.

Because the priest, especially in the many urban parishes, cannot manage the pastoral ministry of pastoral visits on his own, he could easily form a group (group of love),⁵⁷ consisting exclusively of elderly parishioners, who would make pastoral visits to other elder patients or lonely or grieving elders and will convey the message of joy and hope. Companionship to lonely elderly people, a walk or a phone to them is lifesaving, because these actions show that someone cares for them. From the volunteer elderly pastoral visits can be made to nursing homes, hospitals and prisons, while psychological and emotional assistance in special categories of older people (prisoners, abused, alcoholics, having suicide trends) will be important.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, we would say that the people of old age, despite the underestimation and social discrimination they suffer, possess an impressive dynamic and can offer their pastoral ministry to the pastoral work of the Church, properly guided by priests with pastoral zeal.

Today everything is moving fast. But speed alone is not enough. Wisdom, steady course and restraint are needed, elements available to old age. To show the importance of old age in the Church, an American pastor used the example of the clock; a clock has three markers, seconds, minutes, and hours; the pastor likened the new generation to the index of seconds, where he runs very fast with great energy, such as young people; the average age of a congregation is likened to the index of minutes; where yes it lags somewhat in speed, but nevertheless turns the

⁵⁷ Αιμιλιανός Τιμιάδης, Μητρ. Σηλυβρίας, *ibid*, p. 222.

whole clock in one hour; the elders of the congregation look like the index of hours, moving slower than everyone but nevertheless manages to carry the clock cycle twice a day; each pointer has its own function; the pastor ended up saying something amazing; if a clock has only the indicators of seconds and minutes, then it's impossible to see what time it is. You definitely need the time indicator. Therefore, elderly members are extremely essential for mental health and the continuation of church life.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Richards H. Gentzler, *Older Adult Ministry*, p. 28.