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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and Reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Associazione Comunita Papa Giovanni XXIII, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 August 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



COVID-19 and older persons

Without any doubt, COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way older people are living.

According to World Health Organization (WHO) “Older people are being challenged by requirements to spend more time at home, lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues, temporary cessation of employment and other activities; and anxiety and fear of illness and death – their own and others.”¹

WHO confirms that “older people, and people of all ages with pre-existing medical conditions (such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, lung disease, or cancer) appear to develop serious illness more often than others”.² According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of Atlanta the greatest risk for severe illness from COVID-19 is among those aged 85 or older and 8 out of 10 COVID-19-related deaths reported in the United States of America have been among adults aged 65 years and older.³

In the summary overview of the COVID-19 weekly surveillance report (data for the week of 27 July – 2 August 2020) of the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe⁴ is stated that 89% of all deaths were in persons aged ≥ 65 years.

The new and unexpected situation of a global pandemic brought us closer to the need for a new reflection about older persons rights and how societies are called to respond to their needs and protect their lives.

This pandemic has shed a light on the living condition of many of our older persons and on how their rights have been forgotten in many settings. Often the social and cultural context in which we live cuts off older people as there is no more space for the elderly, no more time. We are, in a certain way, forced to live in a high-speed life where the older people look like an obstacle or an obstruction to our way of living. The old person is often seen as someone that has “already” given what he/she could give and now must step aside, and mostly do not disturb as he/she is not useful anymore.

Many societies have reorganized themselves with institutions in which large numbers of older people stay together, are looked after, and finish their life at the borders of the real world. The efforts, professionalism and commitment of the people involved in the care of older people in these institutions are not in question, the criticism is on the idea behind those structures: the older person is reduced to someone that needs medical attention, and therefore needs to be institutionalized. In some cases, it feels as if he/she is a burden to society.

In January 2020, Pope Francis during a speech highlighted the “intangible value” of human life, and how modern society “is progressively eroding the understanding of that which makes human life precious” by evaluating life in terms of efficiency and utility. Lives that are seen as no longer useful are considered “unworthy”, or to be “discarded”. He continued: “a society deserves the qualification ‘civil’ if it develops antibodies against the culture of waste; if it recognizes the intangible value of human life; if solidarity is actively practiced and safeguarded as the foundation of coexistence”.⁵

As everything is related, like Pope Francis reminds us in his Encyclical letter “Laudato Sii” on the care for our common home,⁶ we are all connected, no one is self-sufficient. The elders are, inter alia, the wise that preserve the memory of a society and the society should endorse, with real social policies, that they still have a mission to accomplish, like everyone has, until natural death.

¹ <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/covid-19>.

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-on-on-covid-19-for-older-people>.

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>.

⁴ <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/weekly-surveillance-report>.

⁵ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-01/pope-society-is-civil-if-it-fights-against-a-culture-of-waste.html>.

⁶ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.pdf.

There is the need of a change in culture, change that brings back the centrality of a person no matter what this person can or cannot do, that restores the importance of the family as the natural place where this process can take place, and that includes the older persons in every decision that regards the collectivity. No one is really himself if not within the framework of society and it is in that framework of society that the family plays the basic and most important role: it is indeed the basis of the society. The family is the place where various generations live together and help one another to grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with the other social needs.⁷

We should ask ourselves: which actions increase the quality of life of an older person? Is it just a matter of health and medicalization? We believe it is more than that although for many understandable reasons health issues are of paramount importance, we can't forget emotional, psychological, spiritual needs just to name a few.

It is urgent to think about how to support from an economic educational, medical, social, psychological point of view older persons so that they can live in their own houses or within their own families. Helping older people to maintain their independence as much as possible would have a positive impact on their quality of life.

A new partnership between the private and public sectors is necessary to respond to the needs of older people to live in their own homes and/or with their loved ones.

We all know that in this pandemic older people have paid the highest price: not only in terms of death rate but also in terms of the disruption of living conditions and relationships. Since the disaster has started in care homes all around the world, many governments have focused on the medical aspect often forgetting other important needs of the elderly population; it is due time for a reflection about what is next in the life of our elderly.

As APG23, we support the idea that it is time to revise and renew the way societies take care of their elderly, and that a different and new answer to their needs and rights is needed and possible. If properly supported, families are the natural place where that new answer can take place.

We would like to end by quoting again Pope Francis in his address to the participants in the International Congress on the Pastoral Care of the Elderly: "Social disorientation and, in many respects, the indifference and rejection that our societies manifest towards the elderly demand not only of the Church, but of all of us, a serious reflection to learn to grasp and to appreciate the value of old age. Indeed, while on the one hand States are called to confront the new demographic situation at the economic level, on the other, civil society needs values and meaning for the third and fourth senior stages. (...) Old age is not an illness, it is a privilege! Loneliness can be an illness, but with charity, closeness and spiritual comfort we can heal it".⁸

⁷ http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html.

⁸ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2020/january/documents/papa-francesco_20200131_congresso-pastoraleanziani.html.