



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
Inaugural World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly

Homily

[2Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145; Ephesians 4:1-6; John 6:1-15]

I imagine just about everyone owns a few things they would identify as prized possessions. One of mine is a small pocket watch. On it are engraved the initials ESS, for Ernest Scothrup Smith. That's the name of my paternal great-grandfather. He emigrated from England with his young family, settled in Nova Scotia, and was a conductor on the streetcars of Halifax. He would use that pocket watch to make sure his trolley coach stayed on schedule. He spoke with a strong Cockney accent, and the people called him "Smitty".

Now, why would I think you would be in any way interested to know all that? Actually, I am rather sure you're not. I share it with you because today has been designated by Pope Francis as the inaugural World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly. By this initiative, the Holy Father is calling on all of us to recognize our grandparents and the elders among us as our "prized possession", if you will. These persons are our real treasure. While particular relationships within individual families may not attract everyone's interest, what does merit universal attention is the wonderful gift God gives the world in the grandparents and elderly persons who help shape our lives.

This special day provides the context in which we receive the biblical passages proclaimed in this mass. The World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly opens for us a fresh avenue that leads to a new appreciation of their message.

We have from the Gospel of St. John the familiar account of the miraculous multiplication of loaves and fish, foreshadowed centuries before by the prophet Elisha. The event demonstrates the deep compassion of Jesus for his people, and his divine power to provide superabundantly for their every need. Furthermore, it points toward the Eucharist, the sacrament he instituted to feed us with himself and thus nourish us with his all-sufficient grace. This special day invites us to ponder how the nourishment we receive in the Eucharist extends into the relationship between grandparent and grandchild. I suggest this happens in at least three ways.

First, in the Eucharist, the Lord Jesus nourishes us with a love beyond measure. His love was made supremely manifest in his self-gift on the Cross, which is renewed in the sacrifice of the mass. This superabundant love spills over into the precious relationship between grandparent and grandchild, and forges between them an unbreakable bond. Grandparents happily risk the wrath of their children as they gladly go about spoiling the grandchildren. These young ones are for their grandparents a magnet; wherever the grandchildren are, grandparents will find a way to be nearby. Grandchildren, for their part, look forward eagerly to the indulgences that abound in the grandparents' home. They delight in calling

them by special names, the repetition of which deepens the endearment. In this beautiful reciprocal love, we find a reflection of that of Jesus by which he feeds his people.

Second, in the Eucharist, Jesus nourishes us with identity through belonging. The sacrament of his Body and Blood unites us as a family, in which we are named the children of God, and thus brothers and sisters to one another. Jesus prepares us for this gift by our experience of receiving identity through the natural family to which we belong. Here grandparents play a very important role. I like to illustrate this by a consideration of what happens when grandparents tell family stories. Whenever grandparents recount episodes of past family adventures or tales about growing up, the attention of grandchildren is riveted. They willingly turn away from videogames and put down their smartphones, miss nothing of what is said, drink it all in, and then light up when the grandparents tell stories about them. The joy that they feel, it seems to me, is twofold: it is the joy of belonging, of being a part of something bigger than themselves, part of a network of relationships, and at the same time the joy of being noticed, of having a part, of mattering. Even in the midst of a large family, they are not just a member of the group, but a *someone* who is celebrated for who they are, and who matters just because they exist. In a day when our youth are tempted to name their identity within groupings or collectivities that are anything but healthy, grandparents come to the rescue by reminding them of their true identity within the natural family and, ultimately, within the family of God.

Finally, in the Eucharist Jesus nourishes us with hope. In this sacrament we feed on the Bread of Life and are filled with the pledge of eternal life. That hope takes hold of us in concrete ways through the relationship we enjoy with our grandparents. With the wisdom born of long experience, they bring to our daily problems the perspective of a long view, which helps us to discern what is important and what not, and within which they can reliably assure us that all things will eventually work themselves out. Our assurance of hope deepens when we remember that our grandparents who have gone before us to God are now praying for us. The mercy of God comforts us with the knowledge that He wills to bring them into the communion of saints, where they intercede for us without ceasing. Grandparents are always grandparents, and from heaven they continue to spoil us with the gift of their prayers.

So, as we ponder the love of Jesus at work not only in the wondrous multiplication of the loaves and fish and the Eucharist to which it points, but also in the gift of grandparents and elderly persons, our appreciation for them is exponentially magnified. The pandemic has shown that they do not always receive from us or from society the respect they deserve and the gratitude that is their due. May this and all subsequent World Days for Grandparents and the Elderly awaken us anew to the beautiful blessing they are, and stir us always to reciprocate their love and attention with the gift of our own.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
July 25th, 2021
St. Joseph's Basilica