

“O how comely is judgment for a grey head, and for ancients to know counsel! O how comely is wisdom for the aged, and understanding and counsel to men of honour!

Much experience is the crown of old men, and the fear of God is their glory.”

Instructing a bishop how to administer local Christian communities, the Apostle Paul commands in Titus 2.2: “That the aged men be sober, chaste, prudent, sound in faith, in love, in patience.” In the next verse he instructs: “The aged women, in like manner, in holy attire, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teaching well”.

Elders are duty-bound to share their wisdom by speaking out, but only as it furthers the common good: “I hoped that greater age would speak, and the multitude of years would teach wisdom” admonishes Job 32.7; while Sirach 32.3 has “Speak, thou that art elder, for it becometh thee”.

### **Duties to the Whole Community**

Beginning very early in the third century, Origen succeeded Clement as rector of the foremost Christian educational institution of the day. Origen became the principal theologian of the early Greek church. So great was his knowledge of the Christian faith that he was called upon as a theological consultant by bishops throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Among other teachings, his *Homilies on Exodus* exhort elders to reconcile Christians who have a disagreement, to call the quarrelling back to grace, and to settle disputes.

### **Duties Especially to Younger People**

Scripture and the earliest Christian tradition enumerate other consideration older people are to have for the young. In writing to the Roman emperor around A.D. 177 about how Christians treat one another, Athenagoras of Athens said that the older ones recognize younger ones as sons and daughters. In Titus 2.3-5, Saint Paul includes among the duties of older women that they “teach the young women to be wise, to love their husbands, to love their children, To be discreet, chaste, sober, having a care of the house, gentle, obedient to their husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.”

### **In their Personal Lives**

Scripture and tradition also place expectations on older people in their personal deportment and habits, even if they do not especially affect younger ones. These include (1) Bible study, (2) in their use of alcohol, and (3) in their love lives.

Elders are to learn their duties from the Scriptures, say Origen’s *Homilies on Luke*, which necessarily entails reading and digesting Holy Writ.

While recommending against it for the young, Clement of Alexandria would permit the aged to drink wine. Even so, he said of the elderly and alcohol, “let the limit of their potations be the point up to which they keep their reason unwavering, their memory active, and their body unmoved and unshaken by wine.”

Older adults are to be circumspect in their marital lives, according to Origen and Clement of Alexandria. A husband himself, Clement wrote that continuing with a wife from their youth was appropriate for older men provided they conduct such marriage “blamelessly”. A life-long celibate, Origen in *Homilies on Luke* was stricter and would curb their sex lives severely. He particularly discountenanced lust on the part of old men, as does the story of Susanna in Daniel 13.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the centuries and differences in locale, we find a harmony within the Bible and tradition that shows they come from the same source. Although there might have been differences in emphasis and details from one author to another, we must remember that the foundational documents of our Faith are to be construed as a whole and that we follow the church fathers when they speak in unison rather than following a purely personal opinion when one of them differs from other writers. Even so, their teachings on how younger people are to treat older ones and how elders are to behave and serve are remarkably uniform through time and geography.

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Pamphlet 556

# **The Dignity of Old Men**

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“The joy of young men is their strength: and the dignity of old men, their grey hairs.” – Proverbs 20.29

### **Overview**

The foundations of our Christian faith have much to teach us about how older people are to be treated by those younger than themselves, and the reasons for these obligations. The Douai-Rheims Bible frequently refers to them as “ancients”. Below are relevant passages from Scripture and tradition that dates from so early in time that it is given great consideration by most Christians, not only Roman Catholics.

### **Reasons for Special Treatment**

Let us begin with the reasons the Bible and early tradition give for the special status of the grey-haired, to show that their favored status is amply justified:

- Sirach 25.8: “Much experience is the crown of old men, and the fear of God is their glory.” Sirach 8.9f: “Despise not the discourse of them that are ancient and wise, but acquaint thyself with their proverbs. For from them thou shalt learn wisdom, and instruction of understanding.”

- Sirach 8.7: “Despise not a man in his old age; for we also shall become old.” Some Christians do not accept Sirach as scripture, but Job 12.12 is in Protestant Bibles: “In the ancient is wisdom, and in the length of days prudence.”

Early Christian tradition as recorded in the A.D. 190s by Clement of Alexandria in Egypt, dean of the foremost Christian educational institution of the day, reminded his readers that “old men’s passions are not, for the most part, stirred to such agitation as to drive them to the shipwreck of drunkenness. For being moored by reason and time, as by anchors, they stand with greater ease the storm of passions which rushes down from intemperance.”

### **Respect**

“Respect” is the key concept of how younger people are to treat the old, with honour, support, and special consideration all flowing from it.

The Old Testament expresses this negatively: thou shalt not show *disrespect*:

- Proverbs 23.22: “Despise not thy mother when she is old”

- Wisdom of Solomon 2.10f says that it is the ungodly who oppress righteous poor people and widows and disregard the grey-haired.

- The Lamentations of the Prophet Jeremiah 5.11-13 describe as part of the worst depths of Israel's misfortunes: "They oppressed the women in Sion, and the virgins in the cities of Juda. The princes were hanged up by their hand: they did not respect the persons of the ancient. They abused the young men indecently".

- Baruch, Jeremiah's younger associate, says that it was "a wicked nation...Who have neither revered the ancient, nor pitied children, and have carried away the beloved of the widow" (4.15-16).

- Again, Sirach 8.7 "Despise not a man in his old age", and Sirach 8.9: "Despise not the discourse of them that are ancient and wise".

Less negatively, in the New Testament, 1 Timothy 5.1-2 commands treating older men like fathers and "old women like mothers".

### **Honour**

Honour is an aspect of respect, or one way of showing it. In the middle or late first century, *The First Epistle of Clement*, a letter some scholars attribute to Pope Clement I, exhorts "let us honour the aged among us". In describing Christian principles and morals, Athenagoras of Athens around A.D. 177 records that "to the more advanced in life we give the honour due to fathers and mothers."

### **Submission**

More distasteful to twenty-first-century young people are the ancient injunctions that they are to submit to their elders. This is found in the Bible itself (1 Peter 5.5) and in *The Epistle of Polycarp*, written in the first half of the second century by a bishop who had associated with the Apostle John. Clement of Alexandria advised newly-baptized adults to "Submit to elders just as to fathers." All Christians, not just the young or new converts, should submit to the elders, according to Bishop Ignatius of Antioch around A.D. 107.

However, other places in Scripture and early tradition indicate that such submission is not meant to be abject slavery to an older person's every whim. Rather, it is deference due to their advanced wisdom and authority, such as that to our clergy and secular governments. This is confirmed by the fact that in Old Testament times elders were the usual leaders and representatives of the Israelites, and also their rulers along with the priests. In the Christian writings, the "elders" or "ancients" of a congregation were sometimes the equivalents or forerunners of today's local priests and other church officers. It is often hard to tell

from the ancient literature, but the latter is the usual—but not only—meaning in 1 Peter, *1 Clement*, Ignatius, and Polycarp. In Job, Proverbs, Lamentations, Baruch, Wisdom, Sirach, and Clement of Alexandria, an "elder" or "ancient" indicates any male of advanced years, clerical or lay. The fact that there is such an ambiguity indicates that younger people should show a respect and consideration for older people somewhat akin to that for clergy and secular rulers.

### **Protection**

An anonymous early Christian writing titled *3 Esdras* includes the duty to protect the old within one's walls in a list of eleven good works such as guarding the rights of widows, defending and securing justice for orphans, donating to the poor, clothing the naked, and caring for the weak, crippled, and injured. Its inclusion in such a list indicates that early Christians, not far removed in time from the apostles, believed it to be an important duty.

### **Financial**

Proper treatment of needy senior citizens—and the poor in general—includes financial support. Clement of Alexandria advised wealthy Christians to give to "pious old men". Also in the A.D. 190s, Tertullian recorded that voluntary church collections were used to support and supply the needs of the poor, orphans, victims of shipwrecks, "and of old persons confined now to the house". Tertullian had been a prominent lawyer who converted to Christianity and became a clergyman in Africa.

### **In the Church**

Especially considerate treatment is to be shown to old people in church settings:

- 1 Timothy 5.1: "An ancient man rebuke not, but entreat him as a father"

- 1 Timothy 5.2: [entreat] "old women, as mothers"

In the same vein, Sirach 7.15 instructs "Be not full of words in a multitude of ancients". In writing against inappropriate and excessive laughter even in non-church situations, Clement of Alexandria opposed outbursts "in the presence of elderly persons or others worthy of respect, unless they indulge in pleasantries for our amusement."

### **Rise Up**

Considering the physical weakness often caused by old age, Scripture and tradition deem it appropriate for younger persons to sometimes stand up and offer their seats to older ones. Thirty-five centuries ago, Leviticus 19.32

commanded "Rise up before the hoary head, and honour the person of the aged man". Recently a middle-aged lady stood up and offered her seat to my white hair on a bus in Quebec City, where I am totally unknown, which proves that this aspect of the Catholic faith is still alive and well among the Quebecois. In applying this Scripture verse to his own era, an author in the middle of the third century said that Christians should stand up when a bishop or elder comes, with "elder" probably meaning priest. I remember when a youth in Manitoba young Roman Catholics rose when a priest entered the classroom, even though not elderly.

But this does not end the matter, according to a Syrian church manual of the early third century. Although forbidding a bishop to interrupt a church service to find a seat in church for "a man or woman who has some worldly honour", the *Didascalia* allows laypeople to offer them theirs. However, if the layperson who does so is of advanced years, the deacons are to ask younger worshippers to surrender their seats to such older person, even if the younger must stand during the service. In contrast, if an elderly poor person enters and cannot find a seat in church, the bishop must offer them his, even if the bishop must then sit on the floor. What a bishop was forbidden to do for people of secular importance he must do for the elderly.

### **The Highest Status**

So great was early regard for older persons among the people of God that when addressing bishops and other clergy, the Apostle Simon Peter himself did not refer to himself as pope, prince of the apostles, supreme pontiff or even bishop. The distinction he cherished for himself was "an ancient" (1 Peter 5.1). This indicates the high respect and honour Israelites and early Christians had for older people, in written authorities that should still guide us today.

### **The duties of the old to younger members of the community.**

However, Scripture and the earliest Church tradition do not teach that the grey-haired have a free ride but rather that they have definite duties, especially towards people younger than themselves in the community.

### **Elders are to Share**

First of all, older people are to exhibit and share those qualities of wisdom and good judgment that are supposed to come from long life and experience and that justify their elevated and preferred status. In the Bible, Sirach 25.6-8 praises the qualities associated with the elderly: