

The Age of the Grandparent?



Not so very long ago the word 'grandparent' evoked an image of an obviously elderly, somewhat immobile individual, often in need of care and support. Nowadays, this image would be wildly inaccurate, certainly in Western European countries, like Great Britain and Ireland. Today, a grandparent is likely to be a fit and active person in his/her sixties or seventies, finding time in retirement for a variety of interests, among which family affairs (and members) are likely to be prominent.

*P*erhaps the most important result of this 'rejuvenation' of grandparents - important for society as a whole - is the strengthening of the bond and deepening of the relationship which has always existed between Grandparents and their Grandchildren. The very words call out to each other. Here is how a recent conference on social affairs talks about this relationship: 'Our lives are enriched by our connections

with people older and younger than ourselves. All it takes is the time and willingness to get to know each other. The grandparent/grandchild relationship is perhaps one of the most important of these relationships. It is, in fact, second in emotional importance only to the parent/child relationship. Grandparents can bring their grandchildren a sense of history, unconditional love, and support and advice. Grandchildren

can bring to their grandparents a sense of the present, exuberant love, and a meaningful purpose. Grandparents are keepers of our heritage; grandchildren are forgers of our future. And they can be each other's conscience.' (U.S. Catholic Conference 18.11.1999).

This little study is interested in Grandparents as keepers, especially of our religious heritage. Pope Benedict, in his recently composed Prayer for



Grandparents, calls them *'living treasuries of sound religious tradition.'* In churches and chapels and other religious meeting places, they are very often the backbone of the worshipping congregation, holding it together and ensuring its continuity. Not surprisingly, church leaders are becoming increasingly aware of the actual and potential value of Grandparents in the evangelisation of what might be called the next generation. On the one hand, they possess and value their Faith; on the other hand, they have this unique

relationship with their Grandchildren which forms a natural channel for its transmission.

Parents, of course, remain the first and best educators of their children in religion, as in so much else and, when they are able to carry out this vital task, they will find in Grandparents an invaluable source of help. But parents nowadays often find themselves hampered and constrained. Not infrequently, both have outside jobs as well as a home to run, and tiredness and lack of opportunity may limit the attention they can give to their children. Marital breakdown and single parenthood don't help. In general, Grandparents have a larger helping of that valuable commodity, so scarce nowadays, which we call time; time to listen and time to share.

From all this (and much more which could be added) it is evident that Grandparents are an invaluable

resource in transmitting the Gospel to the next generation. The Church needs to be aware of this, and the magnificent prayer, quoted on page 48, which the Pope has composed, is one of the many signs that this is happening. Parents also need to share awareness. Perhaps, most importantly of all, Grandparents themselves need to be convinced of their vital role in handing on the Faith in the world of today, and the importance of preparing and equipping themselves to carry it through effectively.

