Intervention of H.E. Archbishop Bernardito Auza, Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the UN

6th Session of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing
General Discussion, Agenda Item (4):
"Existing international framework on the human rights of older persons and identification of existing gaps at the international level"

New York, 14 July 2015

Mr. Chair,

The Holy See is pleased to participate in the 6th Session of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing and would like to applaud your leadership and thank you for your unwavering commitment as the Chair of this Open-Ended Working Group since its first session in 2011.

I wish to assure you that my delegation remains committed to the promotion and protection of the human rights and inherent dignity of the elderly, and to the elimination of all forms of discrimination based on age. This discussion is especially pertinent in a time when the elderly are abandoned, not only in material instability, but are also made to feel a burden to society. As Pope Francis affirmed, “it’s brutal to see how the elderly are thrown away... No one dares to say it openly, but it’s done!”

In the West, data tell us that the current century is the aging century: children are diminishing, the elderly are increasing. Currently 700 million people, or 10 per cent of the world’s population, are above 60 years of age. By 2050, it is estimated that this number will double, reaching 20 per cent of the global population. This increasing imbalance is a great challenge for contemporary society. For example, this puts increased pressure on healthcare and social protection systems. Given these figures, my delegation would like to draw particular attention to the needs of elderly women who are often excluded or neglected.

Therefore, as the number of older people increases along with the rise in average life expectancy, it will become increasingly important to promote an attitude of acceptance

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and appreciation of the elderly and to integrate them better in society. My delegation would like to reiterate that the ideal is still for the elderly to remain within the family, with the guarantee of effective social assistance for the greater needs which age or illness entail.

Mr. Chair,

Reflecting on previous sessions, it is evident that there are concerns about the serious gaps that exist in protecting the rights of the elderly, and that there is no agreement yet on how to address them. Some have spoken of establishing new mechanisms similar to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; others have underlined the need to make good on the commitments that States have already made on this matter; still others think that the Madrid International Plan for Action on Ageing already contains the measures we have to adopt to protect the rights of the elderly.

In order to guarantee that the human rights system is effective and commitments are fulfilled, we must recognize that an approach based only on respect for human rights will not be sufficient unless it is complimented by policies and programs that address the underlying causes of the violations it wishes to prevent.

In this regard, it is crucial that we promote policies and systems of education that propose an alternative approach to the dominant “throw-away culture” that judges human beings simply by what they produce. So often, the elderly feel useless and alone because they have lost their proper place in society.

Though it is important to reaffirm the right of the elderly to work or to receive relevant skills training, we must be careful that the policies we promote do not play into the same tired narrative that reduces our value as human beings to what we produce, while ignoring our inherent dignity and the countless other ways in which the most vulnerable among us contribute to society’s greater good. The elderly are a resource and essential point of reference in an age when many struggle to find their identity and have lost hope. Their collective memory and wealth of experience support and guide society, providing direction and especially hope to future generations that must not face the struggles of life alone.

This understanding of the value of ageing and contribution of the elderly to our society is one of the most important antidotes to the tendency to reduce the elderly to purely utilitarian terms. This is the only way to work toward a world that freely and fully respects the rights of its elders.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.