Hope, renewal and continued purpose in later years

By Deacon Roger Carr-Jones, Marriage and Family Life Coordinator

The theme of the Fifth World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly, to be held this year on Sunday 27 July, is "Blessed are those who have not lost hope" (cf. Sir 14:2). Taken from the Book of Sirach, this highlights the blessedness of old age. It indicates hope placed in the Lord, as the Christian way to a reconciled old age. At a time when being old, infirm or even slightly unwell is viewed as a burden, we need a fuller appreciation of the ways in which old age is always fertile and an asset, not unproductive and disposable.

My mother-in-law, who is nearly 90 and living in a care home, does not regard herself as being elderly. Her attitude, frequently strongly expressed, brings to mind the Sinatra song, 'young at heart' with its line, 'And if you should survive to a hundred and five, look at all you'll derive out of bein' alive'. Her life is now different, no longer travelling along a preferred trajectory, yet it continues to feed and sustain others, as well as her being nourished in return.

The connection with her now adult children and their spouses, grandchildren and great-grandchild are facets of her life journey and legacy. Having always enjoyed a pencil thin figure, her family now runs the risk of what is called 'granny bingo': being the recipient of her frank and loud observations should anyone dare put on weight! Such are the moments of intergenerational connection, spiritual and relational, that define and enrich the lives of all.

It is morsels such as these that remind us time and time again that the elderly "are not leftovers from life, scraps to be discarded" (Pope Francis). The elderly and grandparents are essential sources of nourishment in our world, shaping and forming the lives of all. Faith is fundamentally relational and God provides the blueprint for all our relationships, one that is trusting and active.

By contrast the secular societal focus now is on individualism, where no one feels loved or needed. It should therefore come as no surprise that many young people now feel increasingly isolated, lonely and devoid of hope. The Christian way, though, is not in prioritising our personal goals over our social connections, nor in encouraging people to live alone, with limited contact with family. No! No! No!

The Gospels bid us to share what we have and possess in order that we will find true fulfilment in this life. Our society will flounder unless we value and celebrate multigenerational relationships and the unique gifts of the elderly. By contrast, when we feed on the wisdom, experience, and faith of grandparents and the elderly, sharing a hug or words of affirmation, we all grow, flourish and experience hope.

The elderly, like the young, are children of God and it is from this source that our beauty and meaning take form.