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“There’s something of a grandfather about God”

Eliana Palma, a Chilean grandmother, shares her ideas on the role of grandparents in families and society, and talks about how happy she was in the sixty years she spent with her husband, Tito.

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How do you think grandparents could take part in this Year of Mercy? From your own long

experience, what is the role of mercy in people's lives?

Obviously, grandparents have an advantage over young people in that we've seen so much in the course of our lives, so maybe we look at things with different eyes. When you're young you want everything to work out well at the first attempt. You're a perfectionist. That applies to marriage too. But life teaches you little by little that perfection isn't always possible – and that sometimes there are almost more failures than victories. Finally, when you get to a certain age, you understand how important it is to have someone close to you, who supports you. And that's what grandparents are for others. A house with open doors. People nearly always remember their grandparents when things get tough. It seems that's part of their mission, supporting others in those situations. Basically, being a grandparent is

being merciful. We find it easier to turn a blind eye to the defects in our children and grandchildren, and to focus instead on the many good things they do. That's a gift God gives with the passage of time.

I like to think that God sees us that way too. There's something of a grandfather about him. He is merciful like that, he keeps us on our feet. God is also a house with open doors. Just like with grandparents, lots of people turn to him when things get tough. And there he is, always waiting to accompany us and help us on our way.

But to God, all of us are children. Grandparents too. However old we are, however much experience we have, however much we've seen, God has always seen more. And it's great to know that no matter what stage you're at in life, God is always waiting for you with open arms.

Eliana, tell us a bit about yourself

I was born in Limache, a small town in the middle of Chile. I was the fourth of six children. I had a really happy childhood with my parents and siblings, though our life was not luxurious. Last year two of them died within a week of each other. My younger sister also died a few years ago. Today the only ones left are my oldest sister, who is very sick, and I.

You were married for 61 years. What enabled you both to be faithful in your marriage?

Yes, Tito and I were married and stayed together here on earth for 60 years. We got married 61 years ago. He died last year on October 21. He fell sick 8 years ago.

My husband was a thoroughly good man. The love of my life. He was unselfish, and had so many virtues. I was learning from him my whole

life, and that did me a lot of good. I always admired him, more every day. Not just in his years of good health, but also during the years when he was sick, and very limited in what he could do.

I never thought about “being faithful” as such. It wasn’t an issue. For me it was so obvious, faithfulness was what I’d seen in my parents, and what he’d seen in his. Tito loved me very much indeed, and he always told me how much he loved me. I’m grateful for that. We knew we had to make one another happy in little things and in big ones. That was our marriage. And that was what we also wanted to pass on to our children and grandchildren.

Sometimes when I hear about so many break-ups, I realize that we belonged to the times when if something broke, you fixed it; you didn’t just throw it away like people

do today. Fix it as often as necessary, but it never occurs to you to throw it out. If you have that attitude it helps a lot.

You have children and grandchildren, and you've even had some of your grandchildren living in your house for several years. What was that like for you? How do you see the role of grandparents in that situation?

We have four children and fifteen grandchildren. In 1994, for various reasons, my daughter's family moved into our house, with six children. The oldest was 12 and the youngest was a newborn baby. Tito and I did everything for those six grandchildren. We always saw that special situation as something coming from God. He undoubtedly gave us strength. We never felt tired. We felt we were playing an important role in that situation.

Our grandchildren are older now. The oldest is 34 and the youngest is 22. And our roles are beginning to be reversed, because they've been a great support to my husband and me. One of them is a priest. God is so generous!

We were always the sort of grandparents who respected our children's freedom absolutely, and our grandchildren's freedom too. God was always present, but we brought him into things more by the way we lived than by the things we said. And also, we never set fixed dates or days when everyone was obliged to be together. When the family got together it had to be because they wanted to be together. I think that when grandparents are taken into account, and treated affectionately and looked after, they can leave a very positive mark on their grandchildren. So it makes me sorry to see grandchildren who

ignore their grandparents, and parents who don't bring them together. Thank God, our experience was just the opposite.

In his catechesis on the family, Pope Francis said that grandparents' words hold something special for young people. What do you think? What experience did you have with your grandchildren? What are grandparents' responsibilities in that field?

It's true. I always remember something the Pope said in his catechesis on the family: "A people that does not take care of grandparents, does not treat them well, has no future! Because such a people loses its memory." Excluding them is like rejecting the past. It's sad to see how often grandparents are seen as a burden. I remember my own grandparents telling us stories

from their lives. How eagerly we listened! We didn't realize at the time the good it was doing us, or the way they were helping us with their example.

Out of so many memories, there's one about our grandson who is now a doctor. When he was quite small, he'd come and sit on the ground in front of my husband and say very seriously, looking him in the eyes, "Grampa, can we have a talk?" You could see how he hung on his words. Talking with his grandad wasn't boring, still less a duty. And later, when they were older, we could follow their interests because they'd ask what we thought about books, flowers, history, machines, the news, etc. One of the things that drew them to us was that they could see we were always ready for anything they wanted to ask us or tell us. You need to make sure you never look as if you haven't the time or the interest to

devote to your grandchildren. I must say, too, that we have learned a lot from them. And their interests were our interests, because of spending so much time with them.

For parents who haven't yet realized that we grandparents can be a great help when asked, I'd suggest that for as long as their parents are in good health, and always, they should keep grandparents and grandchildren together.

You said that age and experience are an advantage. Growing old also brings challenges and difficulties. What do you find most difficult, and how do you tackle it?

I've always seen growing old as something completely natural, something that will come sooner or later. Life goes by very quickly, and it's vital to keep going forward with a lot of hope.

The hardest thing I've had to face was Tito's incurable sickness and then his death. Even so, I am amazed at how the huge store of good memories he left, has helped me to keep going. My husband was 11 years older than me. When he fell sick, it happened very quickly; my children and grandchildren and I were able to see him declining steadily, and we were also able to realize how that process was enlarging our hearts. We felt more love and tenderness for him all the time. He was the one who had always protected us, and now we were protecting and caring for him. We wanted to look after him, to do everything we could for him and more. Having him with us, in his sickness, for 8 years, was a great gift, a great blessing for all of us. It's an indelible page in the story of our family. Painful and sad, yes, but marked by great happiness and unity.

What advice would you give to newly-weds who are beginning a family?

I'd tell newly-weds that marriage is a wonderful path. A path to travel along together. It's good to be realistic and realize that there is no such thing as a fairy-tale marriage. Sometimes we idealize things too much. But it is possible to work at making that path into something really beautiful and inspiring.

There will often be conflicts, but that's natural, and if both spouses have good will, they will end up loving each other even more. It's a bad idea to think that one serious difficulty is grounds for a separation. Or a reason to be alarmed. I'd also tell them that trust and respect are absolutely fundamental. And that means treating each other well, in speech and in deeds. Another thing is to learn to forgive, including the

ridiculous everyday little things, which are sometimes the hardest. It's silly to argue about who is in the right. That mentality poisons the marriage. Think about the future, share your dreams. Look forward to growing old together. That produces great happiness.

For us, and I think for everyone, it is very important to put God at the center of the family. Turn to him, thank him for everything. Thank him every day for your husband, for your wife. Praying together and suffering together are among the things that bring you closest. Putting God at the center is what brings you closest of all. The path of marriage, for those of us who have travelled it, and for those who are starting out on it, is wonderful. It's worthwhile giving your life to make it work.

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