

Limited and Called - The Witness of the Magisterium of Fragility to a World of Disposable People.

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What is the witness of a claim of weakness and dependency to a world where, as Thucydides put it so long ago,

*“by a law of their nature wherever [people] can rule they will. This law was not made by us, and we are not the first who have acted upon it”*¹

In this paper, I seek to argue that, while society is forced to accommodate the limitations on age to a much greater extent than many other physical and mental limitations, it often does so grudgingly. By contrast, the Magisterium of Fragility offers a healthier vision of humans at all stages of life and in all conditions bearing witness to the loving God who works through and in us all.

It is difficult for society to escape the inevitability of ageing. People inevitably lose capacities they once had and require care where once they did not. As the World Health Organisation notes, people are living longer and this is inevitably attended by losses in capacity, even though the discrimination which often accompany such losses is far from inevitable.² There is an undoubted protection factor which safeguards older people in preference to people whose disabilities are not age related – the knowledge that limitations attendant on age will eventually affect nearly all of us and that protection of older people is to the advantage of everyone. Today’s brash young decision-maker will, after all, be tomorrow’s pensioner.

So it was, for example, that when Australian authorities realised that they had secured insufficient doses of the COVID vaccines, they addressed the problem by “deprioritising” disabled people whose conditions made them particularly vulnerable to the virus in favour of those living in residential aged care facilities.³ On a more mundane level, many societies have measures in place which are supposed to protect older people. These may include informal cultural protection, pension schemes in some countries or even dedicated health care and other facilities.

¹ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 5, 105, Translation by Benjamin Jowitt available at: <https://people.uncw.edu/deagona/cla%20209%20f-11/Thucydides%20Melian.pdf> [last visited 22 October 2025].

² World Health Care Organisation, *Fact Sheet: Aging and Health*, issued 1 October 2025, available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health> [last visited 20 April 2026].

³ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Report on Public Hearing 12* (Sydney: Government Printer, 2021), Finding 6, 5.

It is, however, equally true that, while they may not rank as low on the list of society's priorities as those whose disabilities are not related to age, older people are open to exploitation, discrimination and abuse. Again, the pandemic provided an excellent illustration of this with no less a person than Australia's Chief Medical Officer refusing to mandate the wearing of masks in health care settings while describing the early wave of COVID deaths among the elderly as "the reaping delayed".⁴ The conclusion, that even senior authorities regard older people as disposable when their existence is inconvenient, is inescapable.

What then has Christianity to say in response? I have previously noted that limitation (including those attendant on disability and age (on either end of the spectrum)) is a function of human existence and pertains to all of us this side of our Risen life in Christ.⁵ It is this very fact of limitation as an integral part of the human condition – and its assumption by Christ in the Incarnation – that makes discrimination against people with disability fundamentally problematic from the point of view of a Christian anthropology.⁶

Lumen gentium 11 already made it clear that the sacraments are for all and bind all together in the Church, regardless of age or state of life:

"Fortified by so many and such powerful means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect."

This understanding of the goodness of *all* created bodies and their vocation as they are is reinforced by article 29, which speaks of the variety of physical, mental and moral capacities ("*varia capacitate physica viriumque intellectualium et moralium diversitate*") with which people are equipped.⁷

While there was therefore good theological precedent for Pope Francis' statements about the value of people in all states of vulnerability, his was the first voice of the magisterium to explicitly expose and condemn the

⁴ "We Live in a Democracy, not a Technocracy': Kelly Defends Mask Decisions", *The Age* 29 July 2022, available at <https://www.theage.com.au/national/we-live-in-a-democracy-not-a-technocracy-top-doctor-defends-mask-decisions-20220729-p5b5pj.html> [last viewed 21 April 2026].

⁵ Justin Glyn, "'Et homo factus est': Incarnation, disability and interdependence". *International journal for the study of the Christian church*, 22(1), 47-57.

⁶ Justin Glyn, "'Et homo factus est': 47-57; Justin Glyn, "Pied Beauty: The Theological Anthropology of Impairment and Disability in Recent Catholic Theology in the Light of Vatican II", *Heythrop Journal*, 60 (4):571-584 (2016).

⁷ Justin Glyn, "Pied Beauty", 580.

way in which elderly and disabled people had been relegated to the role of internal exiles within a community (both Church and secular) unwilling to accept the lessons which frailty holds for a humanity often obsessed with the illusion of perfection.⁸ In *Fratelli tutti*, he explicitly equated the position of elderly and disabled people in this regard:

98. I would like to mention some of those “hidden exiles” who are treated as foreign bodies in society. [76] Many persons with disabilities “feel that they exist without belonging and without participating”. Much still prevents them from being fully enfranchised. Our concern should be not only to care for them but to ensure their “active participation in the civil and ecclesial community. That is a demanding and even tiring process, yet one that will gradually contribute to the formation of consciences capable of acknowledging each individual as a unique and unrepeatable person”. I think, too, of “the elderly who, also due to their disability, are sometimes considered a burden”. Yet each of them is able to offer “a unique contribution to the common good through their remarkable life stories”. Let me repeat: we need to have “the courage to give a voice to those who are discriminated against due to their disability, because sadly, in some countries even today, people find it hard to acknowledge them as persons of equal dignity”. [77]

The point in relation to both elderly and disabled people deserves to be drawn out a little. It is not merely that they, like others, bear the Divine image and therefore are owed the same regard as all others who (as *Lumen gentium* said) come with a variety of capacities. Instead, it is these **very** features of their life history and circumstance – regarded as burdensome by some – which given them the remarkable life stories which allow them to make a unique contribution to the common good.

His “magisterium of fragility” elaborated on this in relation to the weakness of elderly people:⁹

Do not hide frailties, no. It is true, they are real and there is a magisterium of frailty, which old age is able to remind us of in a credible way for the whole span of human life. Do not hide old age, do not hide the frailty of old age.

Again, it is important to read what is being said and what is not. A superficial reading of this text in isolation, could view this as a variation of the “victim souls” theory – the view that weakness and suffering is a

⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical Letter (2015), n.117; Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), 98; Francis, *Message of the Holy Father Francis for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2021*, available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20211120_messaggio-disabilita.html [last visited 26 September 2024].

⁹ Francis, “General Audience: 1 June 2022”, available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2022/documents/20220601-udienza-generale.html> [Last visited 26 September 2024]

privilege (which therefore legitimates the subordinated status of elderly and disabled people as victims of discrimination).¹⁰

Such a reading is specifically excluded by the context of the quotation. Immediately preceding it, the Pope had condemned discrimination against older people in uncompromising terms while pointing out the teaching potential that the very fact of fragility holds:

Indeed, shame should fall on those who take advantage of the weakness of illness and old age. Prayer renews in the elder's heart the promise of God's faithfulness and his blessing. The elderly man rediscovers prayer and bears witness to its strength. In the Gospels, Jesus never rejects the prayer of those who are in need of help. By virtue of their weakness, the elderly can teach those who are living in other ages of life that we all need to abandon ourselves to the Lord, to invoke his help. In this sense, we must all learn from old age: yes, there is a gift in being elderly, understood as abandoning oneself to the care of others, starting with God himself.

It is therefore clear that, for Pope Francis, it is not (exploitable) weakness in and of itself that is the “Magisterium” but rather:

- (a) the conscious embrace of that weakness by the older person as an opportunity for opening to Divine grace; and
- (b) the learning by others that that weakness – far from being something distinctive about that person (as in the “victim souls” narrative) – reveals a universal truth about the fragility and limitedness of humanity as a whole.

In short, the opportunity that aging presents is not to marvel at the elderly as handpicked “victims” but rather for both the aging person and those around them to discover the universal truth of human limitation and concomitant interdependence on each other and on God and on how these might impact on our experiences of the human condition.

In turn, of course, this understanding turns the weakness and dependency of old age into something more than mere vulnerability – an invitation to charity or an admonition against discrimination. Seen through the lens of the “magisterium of fragility”, it becomes a point of discovery of the extent to which all of us are dependent upon each other and, like Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:6-10), a reminder that we are invited to display the infinity of God’s strength in the inadequacy of our own.

¹⁰ Justin Glyn, “Pied Beauty”, 573; Christine James, “Catholicism and Disability: Sacred and Profane” in *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Sacred Texts, Historical Traditions, and Social Analysis*, ed. Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp.167-186 and sources there cited.

Later on that year, in his address for the International Day of Persons with Disability, Pope Francis elaborated on what this means for others. Quoting this Dicastery's submission to the Synod in *The Church is Our Home*, he noted that the mere presence of disabled people can transform institutions and situations, making them more human and welcoming.¹¹ Of course, it goes without saying that what applies to the limitations inherent in disability applies equally to those inherent in age.

Pope Leo XIV reminded us of this function of the Magisterium of Fragility in stripping masks from our limitations (specifically in relation to the elderly) in *Dilexi Te*, where he noted that:¹²

The elderly, for example, by their physical frailty, remind us of our own fragility, even as we attempt to conceal it behind our apparent prosperity and outward appearance.

In conclusion then, the Magisterium of Fragility builds on the teaching of Vatican II to assert the unconditional value of elderly and disabled life as an integral part of human existence, rather than an inconvenience. Not only does human weakness teach the person experiencing it at first hand about their limitation and relationship to God but it also makes a claim on society (whether Church or secular) more broadly: a claim that we both acknowledge the limitations of all of humanity frankly and build both Church and society more broadly in a way that speaks honestly to that acknowledgement. In short, it leaves no room for “us” and “them” but only us in God.

¹¹ Pope Francis, Address for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2022 quoted in *L'Osservatorio Romano* 9 December 2022; available at <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/2022-12/ing-049/magisterium-of-fragility.html> [last visited 27 April 2026]; Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *The Church is Our Home*, 22 September 2022, available at <http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/Eventi/LaChiesalanostracasa2022/The%20Church%20is%20our%20home.pdf> [last accessed 27 April 2026].

¹² Pope Leo XIV, *Dilexi Te*, Encyclical Letter 4 October 2025, available at https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html [last visited 27 April 2026], 109.