



A Treasure of Wisdom for the New Generations

By José R. Astúa |
Photography by Lorelly Cochran

He who forgets his history is condemned to repeat it" this is a phrase of the Spanish poet and philosopher Jorge A. Ruiz that can help us to put into perspective the importance of the elderly who, because of their experience, become a source of wisdom for us. Pope Francis tells us: "The elderly are men and women, fathers and mothers who were before us on the same

path, in our same house, in our daily battle for a dignified life" (Amoris Laetitia #191). Pope Francis says that they help us perceive "the continuity of generations", with "the charism of serving as a bridge" (AL #192). A great example of this source of wisdom and foundation of society is given to us by Mrs. Maria Antonia Meneses, an accountant by profession who has lived in Grand Rapids for almost 50 years. Today, at 81 years of age and with enviable health and lucidity, she tells us a little about her history and the history of her family. Maria was born in Cuba and had to emigrate to the United States because of her disagreement with the communist revolution that took place in her beloved island in the 50's and the difficulties it brought with the imposition of its doctrine. She tells how once the revolutionary forces took power many of their rights were taken away. For example, Maria says: "to go to mass we had to do it clandestinely because the churches had been closed and the priests and nuns were censored, they even threw stones at us for being Catholics". In addition, the communist party asked them to

sign a document in which they renounced their faith, which they absolutely refused to do because this would lead them to commit apostasy. In addition to this hardship in practicing their religion, there were innumerable abuses of power by the new government, which confiscated goods and businesses from many Cubans, leaving them practically without the possibility of doing honest work in order to have a decent life. This was what triggered her and her family to leave their homeland.

However, leaving Cuba and arriving in the United States of America was not easy, fortunately during this time of trial the work of God was evident. Maria tells us that her husband, Aracelio, was taken to a concentration camp from which he was able to leave thanks to the miraculous intercession of St. Jude Thaddeus, a Saint to whom she is very devout because of this miracle. Once Aracelio was released, they took the necessary steps to leave Cuba, their first destination being Spain where they lived for four years. Then they arrived in Grand Rapids where they have lived since April 15, 1974.

Here in the United States Maria and Aracelio with their first daughter Lisa started a new chapter in their journey through this world. Years later, God blessed them with a baby boy whom they named Armando. Upon her arrival in the country, Maria searched for a parish to join and found Saint Joseph the Worker, which even at that time offered masses in Spanish. Here their faith continued to grow and was nurtured particularly through their participation in the Cursillo of Christianity. This helped them to embrace their faith much more strongly and to give themselves even more to the service of others in the parish and in her work at the Hispanic Center of Grand Rapids. Sadly, Aracelio passed away when he was only 58 years old the day after serving in a Cursillo weekend. Maria took care of her mother and her husband's mother until one passed away at the age of 95 and the other at 97. Maria remembers them with great affection and tells us that they were the joy of the house, even though caring for them also represented a sacrifice. Family togetherness and activities as a family were very important to them, as well as the services that their parish offered them, from being able to attend masses, other sacraments and events, to bringing them Holy Communion weekly to their homes and the Anointing of the Sick when necessary.

When we asked Maria what the elderly need most from their families and the community, the first thing she told us is that the elderly become more melancholic and feel lonely, even if there are people around them. It is important for the community to actively seek out the elderly who are abandoned and can no longer meet their basic needs. It is important that the parish community visit them as this brings joy to their lives, especially if they are young people who come to them because this transports them to earlier times and fills them with energy". Maria also emphasizes the importance of having a priest visit them as this helps strengthen their spirit.

These are the kind of stories that our grandfathers and grandmothers carry with them and become a real treasure of wisdom for the new generations who can learn from their experience so as not to make the same mistakes or on which to build a better society. Pope Benedict XVI said: "The quality of a society, I would like to say of a civilization, is also judged by how the elderly are treated and by the place reserved for them in our common life" (November 12, 2012). It is our duty at this time, and it will be the duty of future generations to care for those who came before us to pave the way ahead. Only in this way can we continue to build a better world.