

# The Relations of Meaningfulness, Religious Faith and Subjective Well-Being among Elderly People in the Context of Pastoral Care

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Meaningfulness, as confirmed by empirical research, has the power to maintain one's well-being. We examined this hypothesis in the case of elderly people, because this is a critical age when man reflects upon his existence. We interviewed twenty people over 65 years old, living in their homes or a nursing home, about their perception of meaning in life, meaning of suffering, religious faith and subjective well-being. According to the results, the majority of the elderly found their lives meaningful in the past and present as well. It is important to note that the majority of those living in social homes were not able to identify any meaning in their lives. Our research confirms that meaningfulness correlates with subjective well-being: those who found their lives as meaningless, described their mood and their physical health as bad, even in the lack of a concrete physical disease. As for the pastoral counseling of the elderly, we consider that individual or group counseling would be useful in a social home setting, where adopting a logotherapeutic approach could help one in their search for meaning and making a more positive balance of their existence.

*Keywords:* elderly, meaningfulness, religious faith, subjective well-being, pastoral counseling

The question of meaning, that captivated attention through the work of Viktor E. Frankl, in our days is just as actual as in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Meaninglessness, the so called existential frustration, that in many cases is the root of psychical problems, requires for a meaning-centered approach in treating the suffering.<sup>1</sup>

## Theoretical background The actuality of meaningfulness in older age

We consider that the seeking, questioning and frustration of meaning<sup>2</sup> comes to the fore in some critical periods or ages of life. In this point of view, ageing is such a specific period of time: one looks back on their lives and strikes a balance of it. It is an age when experiences are reappraised and integrated in the lifeline and, in better case, one comes to the conclusion that it was a life worth to be lived, together with the failures and sufferings.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise, the failures, omissions or sins of the past keep coming back even after decades. The question regarding how an old man evaluates the balance of his life is significant because Frankl states experiencing meaningfulness is a health-protecting factor<sup>4</sup> and can contribute to the subjective well-being of old men.<sup>5</sup> The reverse is also true: if one appreciates their life as useless, worthless, will be prone to depression and other mental illnesses.

- 1 Frankl makes reference to Irvin Yalom, reknown psychologist, who in his book called Existential psychotherapy relates that about one third of his patients were struggling with meaninglessness, according to their self report. Cf. FRANKL, V.: *A tudattalan Isten [Der unbewusste Gott]*. Budapest : Jel kiadó, 2002, p. 92.
- 2 In Frankl's approach, one can discover and fulfill meaning in three different ways: first through what we give to the world, what we create (creative values), secondly what life gives us, what we experience (experiential values). But experiential or creative values are not the only sources of meaning. Even if we are facing an event that cannot be changed, there is still meaning available in our lives, through the attitude we take when we are faced with unavoidable suffering (attitudinal values). Cf. FRANKL, V.: *The Doctor and the Soul : From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy*. London : Souvenir Press, 2004, pp. 12, 58–59, 109–166.
- 3 Erik Erikson in his theory of lifelong development, considers that the main task of ageing is the formation of self-integrity. One who reaches self-integrity, is able to find order and meaning in their life. Otherwise, the lack or loss of this integrity is signified by despair and makes it difficult for one to face death. Cf. ERIKSON, E.: *Identity and Life Cycle*. New York : International Universities Press, 1959, pp. 104–105.
- 4 Cf. FRANKL, V.: *Az ember az értelemre irányuló kérdéssel szemben [Der Mensch vor der Frage nach dem Sinn : Eine Auswahl aus dem Gesamtwerk]*. Budapest : Jel kiadó, 2005, pp. 210–211.
- 5 At the beginning we must make clear what we understand under well-being. Given that the concept is wide, we use the following definition: Well-being is not only the lack of illness or pain, but it is a psychological state when one experiences joy, content, integrity and meaning of life. Cf. HORVÁTH-SZABÓ, K., KÉZDY, A., PETIK, K.: *Család és fejlődés*. Sapientia Szerzetesi Hittudományi Főiskola, 2007, p. 81.

Those who are in support of the elderly, family members and helpers, can influence in great measure how this balance will look like. We consider that the quest for meaning requires a special attention, so one may get an answer for their existential questions. The present study wishes to offer some suggestions for the pastoral counseling of the elderly.

## Forms of meaning along the lifespan

First of all we must answer the question, what form of meaning can we find at different ages of life. In logotherapy's perspective, future has many different *chances of meaning* in a person's life that wait to be fulfilled. If one accomplishes a task that is in front of him, these chances are transformed in *realized meaning* and become part of the past. However, these accomplished meaningful tasks don't disappear or perish in the person's past, but are conserved for once and ever in form of a creation, good experience etc. that cannot be taken from a person. In a person's life, the proportion of chances of meaning and realized meaning changes as time passes. When a person is young, a mount of chances of meaning is in front of him that wait to be fulfilled. In contrast an old man – in case he lived a meaningful life – left a mountain of values, fulfilled meaning behind – everything that he realized, experienced or suffered – that are "saved" in his past, while future reserves fewer chances of meaning to be fulfilled.<sup>6</sup>

Reaching an older age, a person evaluates how meaningful his life was, makes an estimation about the meaningful realizations of his past. In case the old man understands that nothing can take the mount of values he accumulated, and these are enriching his life for once and ever, he can face successfully the provocations and life tasks of old age, and becomes easier to accept the impermanence of life. In other case, the omissions and failures of the past keep haunting even after decades.

Taking into consideration the reality of death becomes inevitable and the old man has two ways to react: he may decline and revolt against the idea, or he may react with acceptance.<sup>7</sup> There are several tough existential questions that cannot be avoided: what if death dissolves the meaning of the entire life? What is the point of all these struggles if one remains with nothing in the end? Does my life has a meaning that death cannot take away? If the old man cannot answer these questions, he will be prone to existential crisis. Logotherapy has

6 Cf. VIK, J.: Az élet értelme : Logoterápiai megközelítés. In: BODÓ, M. (ed.): *Érték, értelem, lelkeség : Közelítések a logoterápiához*. Kolozsvár : Verbum, 2009, pp. 92–93.

7 Elisabeth Lukas, in her book about the question of meaning in old age, quotes Eugene Bieser who said life of a man is prone to meaninglessness if one is not prepared to accept the unacceptable, which is death, in a cultural environment that aims to suppress the idea of death. Cf. LUKAS, E.: *Beteljesülés – értelemkérdés időskorban [Alles fügt sich und erfüllt sich : Die Sinnfrage im Alter]*. Budapest : Jel kiadó, 2008, p. 38.

elaborated a conception that helps one to deal with the worry caused by life's impermanence. Frankl points to the fact that while future is unsure, past is the concrete reality that cannot be lost or taken away from a person. Fulfilled meanings and accumulated values in the past are, in Frankl's point of view, like the harvest gathered in barns. It may sound strange, but we realize that impermanence of life does not make life meaningless, on the contrary, we can fulfill the meaning of our lives *because* life has an end.<sup>8</sup> As Frankl states: by taking notice of the reality of death, we are constrained to make use of the time we have and don't let the unique occasions to pass away. The meaning of the existence stays in its irreversible feature.<sup>9</sup> This change of perspective eventuates that the old person can see his life as a store-house of accumulated values. He may be proud of his accomplishments, may feel gratitude for the love he gave and received, and for the suffering he endured. However, there are cases when past doesn't seem like a store-house of fulfilled meanings and values, rather the committed failures and neglected opportunities keep coming back, causing disappointment and helplessness, knowing that we cannot do anything to alter what happened. In such cases, the old man evaluates his whole life in negative light, becoming vulnerable to depression. In logotherapy's point of view, in cases like that, we must change our perspective upon the problem. The question is not what life had given me. Rather it is a provocation that invites man to seize the chances of meaning what he still has ahead, and try to repair the failures he can. Man cannot blame fate because of his unfortunate past. Indeed, life reserves some unfortunate events where man has no choice, but he still has the *inner freedom* to take a stand against his fate.<sup>10</sup> There are still possibilities for acceptance, forgiveness, regret, taking another attitude etc. through that one can exceed the limits imposed by his fate. For example, one can decide to resolve an interpersonal conflict that lasts for many years. Lukas says forgiveness is an act that can "gather many harvest in the barn of our life"<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, we must realize that it is never too late to feel regret for a committed sin, even if this turn happens in the last minutes of life. Finally, one can take an inner free stand against the difficulties that must have been suffered in life, as Frankl said: suffering makes a man able to see, and the world transparent.<sup>12</sup> In conclusion, an old man doesn't have to live with the teasing idea that his life was in vain: he either is pleased with the "gathered harvest" – everything he realized, experienced or suffered –, or in the remaining time he can do his best to repair what he can.

8 Cf. LUKAS, E.: *Beteljesülés – értelemkérdés időskorban*, p. 51.

9 Cf. FRANKL, V.: *Az ember az értelemre irányuló kérdéssel szemben*, p. 273.

10 Cf. FRANKL, V.: *Az ember az értelemre irányuló kérdéssel szemben*, p. 55.

11 FRANKL, V.: *Az ember az értelemre irányuló kérdéssel szemben*, p. 65.

12 „Das Leiden macht den Menschen hellichtig, und die Welt durchsichtig.“ FRANKL, V.: *Az ember az értelemre irányuló kérdéssel szemben [Der Mensch vor der Frage nach dem Sinn : Eine Auswahl aus dem Gesamtwerk]*, p. 292.

## The “survival value” of meaning in logotherapy

In the context of the anthropological perspective of logotherapy and existential analysis, we take the person as unity of body (soma) – soul (psyche) – spirit (nous)<sup>13</sup> and we take a holistic approach on well-being. In logotherapy’s conception, the spiritual dimension is not a religious concept, rather the most “human” dimension of man, which holds the possibility of inner freedom and the will of man to find meaning in life.<sup>14</sup> Although these three dimensions are undividable and form a perfect unity, spirit can help one to take a distance from himself<sup>15</sup> and to overcome the barriers of his psychophysical facticity.

From the unity of body, soul and spirit, we can conclude that the found meaning is in strong relationship with psychical and physical well-being. It seems that meaningfulness has a potential that maintains the will for living, that Frankl called “survival value”<sup>16</sup>. To illustrate this, he brings the metaphor of an alpinist who, by getting into the thick fog, losing sight of his aim, is endangered by final exhaustion. Once the fog slips away and the alpine-hut becomes discernible in the distance, he regains power and vitality to continue his way.<sup>17</sup> This analogy may point to the fact how human beings are functioning. If one sees a chance of meaning that addresses them personally – a task to be resolved, someone he can love – this meaningfulness can literally keep somebody in life. We know from Frankl’s personal experiences that only those prisoners of Nazi concentration camps were able to survive in the end, who were open to the future, to a task that was waiting for them, to a meaning they wanted to fill in<sup>18</sup> – as Nietzsche said those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how’.

Frankl himself was concerned with the problem of psychosomatics. However, he suggests that instead of psychosomatic disease, we should be speaking of psychosomatic health. He adds that, from this point of view, the psychosomatic medicine should shift its focus from indispensable disease treatment to the alternative health promotion.<sup>19</sup>

13 FRANKL, V.: Grundriss der Logotherapie und Existenzanalyse. In: SÁRKÁNY, P., ZSÓK, O. (ed.): *A logoterápia alapjai : Kétnyelvű szöveggyűjtemény [Die Grundlagen der Logotherapie : Eine zweisprachige Textsammlung]*. Budapest : Jel kiadó, 2010, pp. 18–19.

14 Cf. FRANKL, V.: Grundriss der Logotherapie und Existenzanalyse. In: SÁRKÁNY, P., ZSÓK, O. (ed.): *A logoterápia alapjai : Kétnyelvű szöveggyűjtemény*, p. 27.

15 This is what Frankl calls the defiant power of the human spirit (Trotzmacht des Geistes).

16 FRANKL, V.: *Az ember az értelemre irányuló kérdéssel szemben*, p. 252.

17 Cf. FRANKL, V.: *The Doctor and the Soul : From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy*, p. 119.

18 Cf. FRANKL, V.: *Man’s Search for Meaning : An Introduction to Logotherapy*. Boston : Beacon Press, 1992, p. 84.

19 Cf. FRANKL, V.: *Az ember az értelemre irányuló kérdéssel szemben*, p. 211.

## The relationship of meaningfulness and well-being: empirical studies

Empirical psychological studies of the last decades seem to confirm the relationship between fulfilled meaning and well-being suggested by logotherapy. The great majority of these studies investigate the relationship of experienced meaningfulness with one aspect of physical or psychical well-being, just like presence of emotional problems, quality of life, adaptation to stressful life-events, expected life-span etc.

Now we only make reference to some empirical studies that pointed out that meaningfulness correlates positively with the indicators of well-being, for example satisfaction with life, positive affectivity<sup>20</sup>, self-esteem, optimism<sup>21</sup>, self-efficacy, subjective health<sup>22</sup>. In the same time it shows negative correlation with negative indicators of well-being, like oncological, cardiovascular and premature death rates<sup>23</sup>, smoking<sup>24</sup>, suicidal thoughts<sup>25</sup>, depressive and anxious symptoms<sup>26</sup>.

Another part of research found evidence that meaningfulness, and interventions that facilitate meaning-making, helps one to accommodate to stressful negative life-events like diagnosis of cancer<sup>27</sup> or the loss of a loved one<sup>28</sup>.

To sum up, there are numerous studies that confirm logotherapy's affirmation about the healthpromoting role of found meaning. In our study we intend to examine this relation in case of elderly.

20 Cf. ZIKA, S., CHAMBERLAIN, K.: On the Relation between Meaning in Life and Psychological Well-Being. In: *British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 83, 1992, pp. 133-145.

21 Cf. STEGER, M., FRAZIER, P.: Meaning in Life : One Link in the Chain from Religiousness to Well-Being. In: *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, Vol. 52, 2005, No. 4, pp. 574-582.

22 Cf. SKRABSKI, Á., KOPP, M., RÓZSA, S., RÉTHELYI, J., RAHE, R.: Life Meaning : An Important Correlate of Health in the Hungarian Population. In: *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, Vol. 12, 2005, No. 2, pp. 78-85.

23 Cf. SKRABSKI, Á., KOPP, M., RÓZSA, S., RÉTHELYI, J., RAHE, R.: Life Meaning : An Important Correlate of Health in the Hungarian Population. In: *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, Vol. 12, 2005, No. 2, pp. 78-85.

24 Cf. KONKOLY THEGE, B.: *A logoterápia és egzisztenciaanalízis egy egészséglélektani vetülete: az élet értelmessége és a dohányzás közti kapcsolat*. Budapest : Semmelweis Egyetem Mentális Egészségtudományok Doktori Iskola, 2009.

25 Cf. EDWARDS, M., HOLDEN, R.: Coping, Meaning in Life and Suicidal Manifestations : Examining Gender Differences. In: *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 57, 2001, No. 12, pp. 1517-1534.

26 Cf. MASCARO, N., ROSEN, D., MOREY, L.: The Development, Construct Validity and Clinical Utility of the Spiritual Meaning Scale. In: *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 37, 2004, No. 4, pp. 845-860.

27 Cf. LEE, V.: The Existential Plight of Cancer : Meaning Making as a Concrete Approach to the Intangible Search for Meaning. In: *Support Care Cancer*, Vol. 16, 2008, pp. 779-785.

28 Cf. KEESEE, N., CURRIER, J., NEIMEYER, R.: Predictors of Grief Following the Death of One's Child : The Contribution of Finding Meaning. In: *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 64, 2008, No. 10, p. 1147.

## Our study

### Objectives, participants and method

First of all, we aimed to examine the relations between meaningfulness, religiosity and subjective well-being among the age-group of 65 years or more.

Secondly we aimed to enlighten whether faith is a significant meaning-source for the elderly.

Finally, we wished to see whether there are differences in meaningfulness and subjective well-being in case of old people who live in their homes and those who live in nursing homes.

The research took place in the spring of 2012. We included twenty people in the study, who were 65 years or more: half of them lived among their families, the other half are residents of nursing homes in Transylvania, Romania. The participants all except one were pensioners and we found different occupations among them: economist, teacher, factory worker, opera singer, farmer, priest etc.

As investigating method we chose semi-structured interview, which makes possible comparisons but the somehow free direction of the discussion as well. We constructed a list of questions which investigates the variables that we were interested in: perceived meaning of life and sufferings, religious faith, physical and psychical aspects of subjective well-being.

## Sources of meaning in elder age

The results confirm Frankl's thesis which says one can fulfill meaning mainly by self-transcendence,<sup>29</sup> with other words by focusing on something or somebody instead of themselves. In the focus of these interviewed old people were in most of the cases their families, their children and grandchildren who still needed their support. The most important source of meaning for people living with their families was the family itself, the welfare of the family. The simple existence of family members seemed to be enough for life to be meaningful. In many cases, supporting a family member was a vitalizing factor. A 79-year old man, who has just lost his wife, said: "When my wife died, I felt I lost the meaning of my life. But then I thought ... my life still has a meaning. I have two minor grandchildren who need my help in trying to find their ways in life." Besides the importance of family, the interviewed people mentioned creative values, involvement in a work or in a noble cause. As a still active economist said: "As long as one lives, he must be concerned with the idea how he can create something useful. Utility means you are serving somebody's benefit,

29 Cf. FRANKL, V.: *Az ember az értelemre irányuló kérdéssel szemben*, pp. 126–127.

you create something positive that can be enjoyed by others as well, not only you." A 67-year old priest named service as the main meaning of his life.

Old people who lived with their families or in close relationship with them, found their lives meaningful. In contrast, the majority of those living in nursing homes, found no meaning in their lives. This may be due to the fact that these people either lived far from their families, or the family showed no interest in them. Isolation and loneliness may stay in the root of meaninglessness. Others named the cutback of their former autonomy and independence as source of meaninglessness. But if the old man sees a task in front of him that is waiting for him, even if he lives in a nursing home, this is seen as a chance of meaning. An old lady who buried her daughter, is the primary support of her grandson: "The meaning of my life is my grandson, I don't know what would happen with him without me. I feel I have this task and this keeps me alive." However, we found examples when in spite of the difficult external conditions somebody suffered (e.g. serious illness, loneliness), one can find meaning in life, in the relationship with God. This attitude is what Frankl called "the defiant power of the spirit".

According to the responses, our presumption was confirmed. There are differences in the perceived meaning of life between elderly living in their homes, and those living in nursing homes: this latter category found less meaning in their lives.

Regarding the perceived meaning of their sufferings, one third of the interviewed answered their sufferings had a meaning. When asked about what this meaning had been, we received different answers. Some said defeating the difficulties makes one strong, so they are for the benefit of the person. Others put the meaning of their suffering in spiritual context. A 82-year old choir master said in their sufferings they had the chance to experience God's help and support. A priest, who had been successfully healed from a cancer disease, said through the sufferings God educates one to be compassionate: "My calling includes the task to re-enforce others, and to be authentic, I can do this through my own experiences. So God let me experience difficulties. Until you did not suffer, you can't understand the suffering man." Finally, somebody said her sufferings gained meaning by offering them to God, so thus she could serve others.

## Religious faith as a source of meaning

In our study we were curious about the religious faith of the elderly, most of all about the intrinsic or extrinsic orientation of their faith. By intrinsic

orientation we understand a more integrated religious faith, which usually involves a personal relationship with God, while external orientation is driven by the social and personal benefits of religiosity.<sup>30</sup> We presumed that the form of religious orientation will influence whether faith can be or not a source of meaning.

Among the interviewed people, only one said that he did not believe in God. Half of those who declared themselves as faithful said they nurtured a personal relationship with God, which means they were regularly praying with their own words.

We were interested whether the religious faith is or not a meaning source for the elderly. Only two people out of the faithful said the meaning of their lives is the communion with God, and the hope of eternal life. Not surprisingly both of them could be characterized by intrinsic religious orientation. One of them, a priest said: "As Saint Paul said, if Christ hadn't risen from the death, your faith is in vain. If there was no resurrection, no eternal life, what is the point of everything else? This is what I proclaim, what I live for."

Regarding eschatological hope, half of those defining themselves faithful said they believed in some form of eternal life, but only three said they believed in resurrection of the dead. These responses need some remarks and explanation. We can see that less than half of the faithful elderly believed there was life after death, the others had no eschatological hope. This proportion shows us that religious faith doesn't necessarily results in hope. This hope is in relationship with intrinsic religious orientation, and only this form of more personal faith can be a source of meaning.<sup>31</sup>

## The relationship of meaningfulness and subjective well-being

The subjective well-being of the elderly was examined through questions like: how do they feel in general, how is their mood usually, how do they appreciate their health etc. Half of the interviewed answered they were in a good mood in general, the majority of them lived in their homes. In contrast majority of those who lived in a nursing home characterized their general mood as bad or blue. Secondly, the appraisal of general mood and physical well-being showed correlation. All but one of those who appraised their mood as good or satisfying, found their physical health as good as well.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. MALTBY, J., LEWIS, C.: Measuring Intrinsic and Extrinsic Orientation toward Religion : Amendments for Its Use Among Religious and Non-Religious Samples. In: *Person Ind Diff*, Vol 21, 1996, No 6, pp. 937-946.

<sup>31</sup> There are several empirical studies that showed how meaningfulness mediates the relationship between religious faith and well-being, with other words the benefits of religious faith on well-being exert their effect through meaningfulness. Cf. STEGER, M., FRAZIER, P.: Meaning in Life : One Link in the Chain from Religiousness to Well-Being. In: *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, Vol. 52, 2005, No. 4, pp. 574-582.

We were interested in how perceived meaning of life is related with subjective well-being. In case of the elderly, we found a strong correlation between these two factors. Two third of the interviewed people who found their lives meaningful, with one exception, could be characterized with high level of subjective well-being: their mood is good or at worst variable. In contrast those who considered their lives had no meaning – all residents of a nursing home – appreciated their mood as bad. Being a correlation, we can't draw conclusions regarding causality: whether finding meaning in life leads to higher subjective well-being, or this latter results in greater tendency to find meaning in life. From the perspective of logotherapy, the direction of this causality is more evident: as we mentioned before, according to Frankl, found meaning contains "survival value". If one realizes what is the task that is waiting for them, one will have a reason to live, and this will lead to different forms of well-being: joy, fulfillment, vitality etc.

## Summary

Taking a look on the results, we can draw the following conclusions. The relationship emphasized first by logotherapy, and confirmed by numerous empirical research, was confirmed in case of elder people as well: perceived meaning of life correlates positively with subjective well-being.

Our presumption that religious faith is a source of meaning, was only partly confirmed, this relation depending on the type of religious orientation. Thirdly, we found differences in case of perceived meaning and subjective well-being between elderly living in their homes and those living in nursing homes.

Among the limits of our study, the main limit was the small sample size, which doesn't allow us to show statistically significant relations between the variables. We suggest the repetition of the research in case of a larger sample, with methods that allow statistical processing of the data.

## Suggestions for the pastoral care of the elderly

The social problems imposed by old age – losses, end of the occupational status, and most of all the loneliness and isolation – came to the surface in our study as well. In many cases loneliness is the source of meaning crisis. The nuclear families of modern age don't anymore include grandparents, so old people are often left on their own, and find proper care only in a nursing home. Confronted with this social reality, it is a provocation for the Church if it wishes to address this large group and wants to offer consolation for the problems of loneliness, isolation and meaninglessness.

One way to approach elderly could be individual or group pastoral counseling. Pastoral care is not exclusively the responsibility of the priest.

Laypersons can be included in this service, who assume to visit regularly and stay in touch with lonely, hopeless old people. Old people living in nursing homes need special treatment being a more vulnerable group in this sense: they find less meaning in life and their subjective well-being is lower. We consider that logotherapy and existential analysis, combined with enhancement of eschatological hope, can offer efficacious answers to the existential questions raised by old people.

The advantage of individual pastoral counseling is its more personal aspect, the time and attention are exclusively accorded to somebody. Group counseling can be realized at the parish or nursing home, its advantages are being part of a community, gaining force from the others' experiences, reciprocal emotional support.

According to the results, we can draw another conclusion. Although the interviewed old people mostly defined themselves as faithful, in many cases this religiosity lacks any personal elements. It is remarkable that less than half of the faithful old people believed in any form of eternal life. Pastoral care of the elderly could aim to enhance the personal dimension of religiosity, either by correcting negative God images or through emphasizing eschatological hope in the evangelization.

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