

## **Ministry to the Elderly**

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The aging of the population began to accelerate in recent times. Many developing countries have entered the epoch of an aging population. The United Nations predict that population aging will occur mainly in developing countries in the next 35 years.<sup>1</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) categorized 60–74-year-olds as the younger elderly, 75–89-year-olds as the elderly, and 90-year-olds as elderly-elderly or “macrobian elderly”.<sup>2</sup> Aging is the process of change which occurs after physical maturity has been reached. Aging occurs at three levels, namely, Biological Aging –refers to changes in the structure and functions of the body organs and systems which occur across the time; Psychological Aging –refers to changes in adaptive capacities and behaviours due to a greater experience and; Sociological Aging –refers to changes in roles, social behavior and social expectations across a life time.

Series of complex emotional psychological problems that greatly affect the occurrence, development, and treatment of diseases will occur to the elderly as a result of dysfunction or sudden changes of living environment. And of them, depression has been known to be associated with functional limitations in elderly populations, while anxiety is often overlooked by the focus on dementia and depression, receiving little attention even though it has occurred in the elderly.<sup>3</sup>

This article seeks to understand the context for ministry with the aging, to know the elderly in biblical perspective and to address the question how can we, as minister, prepare for the needs of a growing elderly population? It also offers some guidelines for the Pastoral Care of elderly.

## **The Context for ministry with Aging**

According to the Genetic Theory, cells are programmed to die after they have divided a certain number of times.<sup>4</sup> The Wear and Tear theory states that over the course of time the cells reduce the capacity to function properly. However, it is important to know that aging is not a disease or not equated with the loss. Rather, it is a process and an inevitable part of life. The perception of old age as a period of decline, in which human and social inadequacy is taken for granted, is in fact very widespread today. But this is a stereotype. Aging is both ascent and descent; both loss and gain. People today live longer and enjoy better health than in the past. They are also able to cultivate interests made possible by higher levels of education.

In addition, aging is our journey of life, we have to let go in order to move forward. Aging is paradox and contradictions (Mathew 16:25). Emptiness can somehow be fullness; weakness can be strength; dying will lead to new life. According to Carl Jung, We cannot live the evening of life in the same manner as in the morning. Middle years refer to a time of *Doing Ministry* and Old age refers to a time of *Needing Ministry*.<sup>5</sup> Awareness of aging at any age give a precious opportunity to understand life, to see what really matters, to know human strength, to accept love and embrace the grace of God. We therefore need to situate old age in the context of a precise providential scheme of God who is love. We need to accept it as a stage in the journey by which Christ leads us to the Father's house (John 14:2). Only in the light of the faith, strengthened by the hope which does not

deceive (Romans 5:5), shall we be able to accept old age in a truly Christian way both as a gift and a task.

In his message to the UN's *World Assembly on Ageing*, Pope John Paul II affirmed: "Life is a gift of God to man who is created out of love in the image and likeness of God.<sup>6</sup> This understanding of the sacred dignity of the human person leads to the appreciation of every stage of life. It is a question of consistency and justice. It is impossible to truly value the life of an older person if the life of a child is not valued from the moment of its conception. No one knows where we might arrive, if life is no longer respected as something inalienable and sacred."

### **Why Are the Elderly Overlooked Today?**

Here are three common objections that often prevent us from reaching out to the elderly:

- Elderly people don't understand what we're trying to communicate. Many times the disabilities of the elderly cause us to believe that they cannot understand us or that they aren't aware of what's going on around them. Although for some elderly people this may be true, the majority is well aware of their surroundings and is capable of communicating with others.<sup>7</sup>

- Elderly people don't have much potential. Often we fall into the thinking that since elderly people don't have much of their lives left, they can't be productive for Christ. There is a common tendency among the people that since elderly people can't be as productive as younger people; it's not worth the effort to minister to them. Elderly people, however, can have a big impact. Ministry to the elderly does require patience, but if we're faithful we will eventually see results.

- We can't relate to them. Often elderly people seem different from us—since they've lived most of their lives during a time unfamiliar to us, they seem detached from modern life. We think that we can't relate to them. But spending time with elderly people reveals that they aren't much different from us and that, in fact, we can build meaningful and rewarding relationships with them.

## **Aging in the Bible**

Old age is not the end or the conclusion of one's spiritual life. Rather it is an important period to discover a rich reserve of experiences and abilities to get the feeling of satisfaction with the person's past life. Every person possesses surprising and limitless creativity as we have been created in the image of God. The Sacred Scripture considers old age as a gift that renews the spirit to live each day with openness to God and to the neighbor. In the Old Testament the elders are viewed as teachers: "How becoming to the aged is wisdom ... the crown of old men is wide experience; their glory, the fear of the Lord (Sirach 25:5-6). The elderly have another important task of communicating the Word of God to new generations: "O God, we have heard with our own ears; our ancestors have told us the deeds you did in their day, with your own hand in days of old" (Psalm 44:2).

The following are some important and enlightening biblical references with regard to our present situation.

## **Respect for the Elderly**

In Scripture, esteem for the elderly is transformed into Law: Stand up in the presence of the aged...thus shall you fear your God (Leviticus 19:32), honor your father and your mother (Deuteronomy 5:16). Everything must be

done to put an end to the tendency to ignore and marginalize the elderly and therefore it is necessary to educate new and future generations about ways of integrating and living with people of different ages.

### **Connection with the Past**

When Moses was in the presence of the burning bush, God presented himself as the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob (Exodus 3:6). God placed his name beside the great elders who represented the legitimacy and the promises of Israel's faith. In the book of Exodus, beside the name of each patriarch appears the expression the God of and this phrase reveals that each one of the patriarchs had his own unique experience of God. This experience, which was the patrimony of the elders, also provided them with a foundation for their spirituality during the time of their youth and was the reason for their serenity at the time of death. Paradoxically, the elderly who communicate what they received also give profound meaning to the present moment. This is indeed a call and a reason to reflect especially in light of the fact that we live in a world that exalts external youthfulness and that seems to have no memory or recollection of the past and no vision of the future.

### **Old Age as a Possibility for Hope and for a Full Life**

God's salvific plan is also fulfilled in the frailty of old, weak and impotent bodies. Thus the chosen people were born from the sterile womb of Sarah and the hundred year old body of Abraham (Romans 4:18-20). Also John the Baptist was born from the sterile womb of Elizabeth and the aging body of Zachery. When life becomes most difficult and one feels most weak, the elderly have reason to feel that they are instruments in the history

of salvation because the Lord promises: with length of days I will satisfy them and show them my saving power (Psalm 91:16).

## **A Call to be Mindful of the Sacred Nature of Death**

Then he breathed his last, dying at a ripe old age, grown old after a full life; and he was taken to his kinsmen (Genesis 25:7). This biblical passage has great relevance. The contemporary world has forgotten the truth about the value of human life –a truth that from the beginning was engraved by God on the mind of humankind. As a result the contemporary world has also lost sight of the full meaning of old age and death. Death has lost its sacred character, its significance as a passage and the door that invites one to communion with God and with one's ancestors in the faith.<sup>8</sup>

But the Son of God made man gave a new meaning to death as he accepted the cross. He opened wide for us the doors of hope: I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, even if they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die (John 11:25-26). In light of these words, death is revealed as a time of sure and certain hope of encountering the Lord face to face and not a condemnation or a foolish conclusion to life that ends in nothingness.

## **Old age, a Time of True Wisdom**

According to the Bible one of the gifts of longevity is wisdom, though it is not some automatic prerogative that is given to the elderly. Rather wisdom is a gift of God that ought to be accepted and that should be seen as a goal that allows us to count our day aright, that is, that enables us to live responsibly the time that Providence gives to us. At the very heart of this wisdom is the discovery of the profound meaning of human life and the transcendent destiny of the human person.<sup>9</sup>

## Elderly Life in the Early Church

The early Church offered the elderly important roles in the community. They made the elderly feel honored and respected. Mark. 12:42, Luke. 7:12. The letter of St. Clement of Rome to the Corinthians gave emphasis on the rights of widows and orphans. In the writings of Barnabas, he gives priority to the social justice and almsgiving. The care of widows, orphans and the poor people became one of the first duties of bishops and the deacons. Ignatius of Antioch warned the bishop of Smyrna: “ widows must not be neglected. After the Lord you must be their guardian.”

Justin speaks of a collection on Sundays which was to be deposited to distribute to the poor. Tertullian mentions that the monthly collections to be used for the support of the poor and old widows. *Didascalia Apostolorum* of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century mentions about the ministry of bishop and deacons to the widows and the poor. It says, “Let him be merciful and gracious and full of love and let his hand be open to give, and let him love the orphans, widows and strangers. As the number of widows and the poor increased *diakonia*, service of charity, was organized in the early Church. St. Lawrence took care of 1300 widows. Early Church gave the widows some spiritual roles such as counseling the young with emphasis on prayer, fasting and almsgiving.<sup>10</sup>

According to Athenagoras, early Christians treated the elderly as if their own parents. Clement of Rome saw that the disrespect to the elderly was the cause of disorder in the society, particularly in the Church of Corinth. Importance of the elderly in the early Church was a mark of respect. Elderly were on the top of pyramid of Christian society. According to Tertullian, the elderly were the holy ones since they spent more time on prayer because they were free from domestic duties. 1 Tim. 5:5. He also said that widower should not remarry because his present situation was the will of God, so the

second marriage was adultery. Therefore those elderly were living a life of continence (is a virtue that resists the strong impulses of lust, renunciation of desires of the flesh). There were also people who took up the ideals of continence at their baptism. Polycarp of Smyrna referred to the widows as *the altar of God*. In the course of time the virgins were ranked above widows. Monastic groups were started to carry the ideals which were once the privilege of the order of widows. Finally the emphasis was given to consecrated virginity rather than holy widowhood.<sup>11</sup>

### **Magisterium of the Church with regard to Old Age**

In his address to the World Assembly on *Aging*, organized by the United Nations and held in Vienna (July 1982), Pope John Paul II offered a biblical vision about positive aspects of old age. The Old age is the time when men and women must reap the harvest of the experience of their whole life, make an apportionment between what is essential and what is subsidiary and attain a level of great wisdom and deep serenity. It is the period when they can devote a great deal of time, or even all their time, to loving their familiars or casual acquaintances with the disinterestedness, patience and discreet joy so admirably displayed by many old people. It is also, for believers, the blessed opportunity of meditating on the splendors of the faith and of intensified prayer. The rich promise of these values and their survival are linked to two inseparable conditions. First, the elderly themselves must whole-heartedly accept their age and appreciate its potential. The second condition is that modern society must become capable of recognizing the moral, emotional and religious values enshrined in the mind and heart of the old, and it must strive for their integration in our civilization, which suffers from a disturbing gap between its technical level and its ethical.<sup>12</sup>

In concluding his message to the Assembly the Pope put forth some lines of action ... some that were proper to the international political community and others that were proper to more immediate and direct levels:

- To protect life and its dignity until its natural end, providing for palliative care.
- To enable the elderly to remain self-sufficient and mobile as long as possible.
- To promote a culture in which the elderly have a place and to educate all levels of society with regard to this problem.
- To encourage the elderly to understand the evolution of present day society and to help them overcome and put aside attitudes of pessimism and fear of change.
- To promote an intergenerational education so that the elderly can teach the young and the young can teach the elderly.

During his visit to England on September 18, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI visited Saint Peter's Residence, a home for the elderly under the direction of the Sisters of the Poor of Saint Jeanne Jugan. The Pope stated: The Church has always had a great respect for the elderly. The Fourth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother as the Lord your God commanded you" (Deut 5:16), is linked to the promise, "that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land which the Lord your God gives you" (Deut 5:16). This work of the Church for the aging and infirm not only provides love and care for them, but is also rewarded by God with the blessings he promises on the land where this commandment is observed.

He further said that life is a unique gift, at every stage from conception until natural death, and it is God's alone to give and to take. One may enjoy

good health in old age; but equally Christians should not be afraid to share in the suffering of Christ, if God wills that we struggle with infirmity. Our long years of life afford us the opportunity to appreciate both the beauty of God's greatest gift to us, the gift of life, as well as the fragility of the human spirit. Those of us who live many years are given a marvelous chance to deepen our awareness of the mystery of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity. As the normal span of our lives increases, our physical capacities are often diminished; and yet these times may well be among the most spiritually fruitful years of our lives. These years are an opportunity to remember in affectionate prayer all those whom we have cherished in this life, and to place all that we have personally been and done before the mercy and tenderness of God.

### **Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of Elderly**

The Church strives with maternal solicitude to support older people through forms of assistance and charitable activities. She also urges older people to continue their own evangelizing mission. The older people in the Church can contribute the following ways:

- **Charitable activities:** There are number of older people who have enough physical, mental and spiritual energy to devote their own time to the various activities of the volunteer services.
- **Apostolate:** Older people can make a major contribution to the preaching of the Gospel as catechists and witnesses to Christian life.
- **Liturgy:** Many older could fulfill the ministry of lector, altar servers and other liturgical activities.
- **The family:** Older people represent the “historical memory” of the younger generations. They are the bearers of fundamental human values.

- **Promoting integration:** older people must be integrated, without any form of discrimination, into the Christian community.
- **Participation in the sacramental life of the Church:** older people must be helped to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and in pilgrimages, retreats and spiritual exercises.
- **Sacrament of the sick and dying:** the administration of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and of Viaticum must be fostered in a special way, and preceded by appropriate catechesis.
- **Caring for elderly priests:** it should never be forgotten that the ranks of older people also include priests, ministers of the Church and pastors of Christian communities. The diocesan Church must assume responsibility for looking after these elderly priests.
- **Engaging:** While the elderly may not be able to serve in the same way that they once did, it doesn't mean that they can't be useful to the parish community. We need to think of creative ways to engage our aging people. They can also be an active participant in praying for the needs of church. Even those who are homebound can be given a weekly list of prayer concerns to pray at home. We can seek their wisdom in matters related to the church, the ministry, and Christian living as they have gained in their life over the course of time.
- **Connecting:** Depression is a serious concern for the elderly, particularly for those with chronic health conditions, those with limited mobility. Loneliness, isolation, and feelings of uselessness can make the days long and hard for them. Therefore, as Catholics, we need to be present, active, and connected in the lives our elderly brothers and sisters. This means that we need to reach out to them and visit them in their homes. Youth

groups can come and help with needs around their home. Other volunteers can take them to doctor's appointments or can shop for them.

- **Encouraging:** As a person ages, the realities of death are more present than ever before. Pastors and other church leaders need to be intentional in ministering to the spiritual needs of the elderly, particularly when it comes to the topic of death and eternity. The Church needs to be prepared to minister to and serve these challenges. We need to engage, connect and encourage our aging brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Church has an obligation to motivate the elderly to become very aware of their task to transmit the gospel of Christ to the world, thus revealing to all people the mystery of Christ's continued presence in history. The Church also has an obligation to make them aware of their responsibility to be witnesses before the human and the Christian community –witnesses of their fidelity to God who always is faithful to his promises with humankind. Pastoral activity with the elderly ought to focus on helping them to develop a spirituality that is proper to their age, that is, a spirituality of rebirth that Jesus spoke about with Nicodemus when he invited him to not allow his age to prevent him for being reborn in the spirit, reborn to a new life filled with hope because what is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit (John 3:6).

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## **Endnotes**

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- 9 Ibid.
- 10 William M. Clements, *Ministry with the Aging: Designs, Challenges, Foundations*, 37-48.
- 11 Ibid, 49-51.
- 12 Maria Angeles Infante, *The Elderly as Viewed from the Perspective of the Bible and the Church's Magisterium*.