

SPIRITUALITY

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“Aging is above all a gift, but without doubt also a task” (Piet van Breeman, s.j.)

It is often said that old-age is the evening of life. This being so, it is also the case that it is impossible to live as though it were morning. Things that were important at other times have often lost their meaning and those which seemed insignificant take on great importance in the last years of life.

Thus old-age gives priority to those values which, though essential to existence, have not had the importance which they have deserved. With the advance of age, the human being is brought by nature to withdraw, to turn-in on himself, often to live in solitude. He becomes silent in order to

- listen more peacefully to those who are dear to him.
- bring to mind significant memories and savour them calmly.
- free himself from all profane or other compulsions.
- penetrate his own interior life, undertake what Dag Hammarskjold, previous secretary general of the United Nations, called “the longest voyage”.

Unfortunately these moments of peace are often accompanied by a diminution of physical and mental capacities; the human becomes more fragile and the list of health problems lengthens. He more and more needs the help of others and the progressive loss of autonomy sometimes goes as far as complete dependence, a heavy cross to carry. In this phase of life, he must therefore acquire a new maturity at the cost of a conscious effort, combined with self-honesty and humility. Once reached, a successful old-age can become an enrichment for the person himself and those near to him. C.G. Jung used to say in this regard: “man changes himself only if he accepts” [and allow me to add “only if he accepts himself”].

For us Christians, the message is formulated thus: even if our strength abandons us and we can no longer work, we still have a part to play on this earth. Ignatius of Loyola went so far as to say that our mission includes “the fact of dying”.

We know the different stages of aged persons:

- “the newly retired”, those who have already had “aches and pains”, but still have an active lifestyle; then
- those aged persons having lost autonomy; et finally
- those touched by personality changes brought on by senility or a dementia like Alzheimer.

What use is a life so seriously disrupted, at this last stage? In fact, by all known values, human dignity remains and the gravely ill, without being aware of it, raises the gaze of others towards the transcendent. [a service of inestimable value].

In general, the aged like to repeat themselves, whether consciously or otherwise. They are delighted at taking center stage in a conversation, even if they have nothing new to say. They are then the same stories of a past which they have idealized out of need for security, for ritual and from inertia.

Some aspects of spirituality in old-age.

A. Prayer

As the human ages, his social contacts diminish. It can be a difficult experience to find oneself alone, but equally an invitation offered by nature to enter into oneself. One must take advantage by praying. No doubt, the prayer of the aged is marked by maturity and depth, but not without difficulties. It can be that access to this place of interior peace may be difficult for an aged person because he has lost his ability to concentrate or because physical pain prevent him from entering into himself. One should not therefore idealize old-age as a time of prayer. If one has prayed traditional prayers his whole life (Our Father, prayers of the Mass, the Rosary, the Psalms), these become a great help. With the prayer of supplication and especially thanksgiving, they constitute a support upon which the person can lean, especially if he is unable to participate in the religious offices.

B. Relinquishment

It is a law of nature that obliges us to continually abandon something in order to grow physically and mentally. The refusal to progress, to mature

and give-up what is past and which only proves an obstacle to the spirit is what some psychologists consider as the source of numerous mental disorders. In old-age, relinquishment, letting go should take place more and more, and this is why it is important for the spirit to stay awake, even at the cost of giving up certain comforting and habitual things.

In reality, this experience of letting go is very difficult. The aged person remains conscious of having engaged in a process which touches goods in various areas: material goods, physical activities now impossible, loss of friends and loved ones, progressive isolation. At the same time, at the spiritual level, the aged person can pass through a stage of spiritual darkness like that experienced by Saint Therese of Lisieux in the last months of her life. The obligation to let go becomes more and more frequent, it is the preparation for the final sacrifice, that of one's earthly life, so that the person who will die needs to abandon himself completely to God. However, there is nothing passive in all this; the grace needed is assured and the final relinquishment, and it needs to be maintained, will be followed by an incomparable return, that of beholding God face to face.

C. Forgiveness

Entering into oneself, which takes place in the aged person, permits him to re-examine his life, to pick up the main lines and, as needs, to finish with that which is not yet resolved. Just as a writer reviews his manuscript many times before bringing it to the editor, the human being reviews his existence in order to die in peace.

One of the most significant aspects of this task is called FORGIVENESS, that which one gives and which one receives. Forgiving someone can be quite difficult and one can delay for a long time. One must remember when one waits upon a word or a gesture of reconciliation from another. It is in any case a very serious step which should lead to the undoing of all aggression and all violence. Pope John-Paul II never stopped stressing that there is no peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness.

Finally, granting forgiveness is not:

- wearing out simplistic naiveté, and more than “dropping” the matter in order to find peace. Forgiveness is confronting and combating the evil.

- forcing oneself to forget, but to see the wounds that were inflicted on us from a different perspective.
- being weak and refusing to face reality, but instead being courageous.
- a synonym for reconciliation. This occurs between two people, while forgiveness remains independent of contact with the other.

Forgiving means maturing, a long and difficult journey which calls for strength, but not forgiving entails the loss of much energy and joy.

Being forgiven is something quite different: like “the ordeal of love is faithfulness; forgiveness is its perfect fulfilment” (Werner Bergenguen). God being all love, He is equally all forgiveness and the human being can only receive this gift by which his faults are remitted.

For aged persons, this act of forgiving and being forgiven (by others or by God) represents an important task which brings peace and the confidence to realize the last part of the journey.

[the following fact was recounted to me: the mother of a young man, victim of violence, wanted to meet the murderer of her son before dying in order to tell him that she had forgiven his atrocious act]

D. Loneliness

The loneliness of aged persons constitutes for many of them a problem to fix. They lament: “No one needs me”, “Hardly anyone visits me”, “I have been forgotten”, “No finds time to come and see me”.

Others succeed in occupying themselves in their solitude, finding satisfaction in the fact of being alone and end by accepting it, even if they suffer at times. The poet writes “In the afternoon, the light becomes peerless. When the shadows draw out, the stars are born. It is the great silence. You are by yourself. But do not be alone”.

It would be an error, then, to evade the worry and throw oneself into excessive activities which prevent living the solitude. Old-age should be a peaceful time because it calls towards a higher goal, that of loving and having faith in God and one’s own. It becomes, then, indispensable to find new roads towards these and to fill the solitude with love of others.

To conclude, it can be stated that contact with aged persons represents a confused way of facing one’s own age. “Accompanying a person in his

illness and up to his death is a profound privilege which transforms all of life”. (Piet van Breeman, s.j.).

N.B. This text was inspired by the reading of a German book “Vieillir, une voie spirituelle” of Piet van Breeman, s.j. (Editions Echter, Wurzburg, Germany, 2004). I must confess that I drew extensively from his writing in translating it into French. Consequently, my text should be considered as one long citation, where I have allowed myself to insist on certain passages and to add some personal reflections [found within inverted commas].

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