

OLD AGE ENEMY ?

By Hortense de Villiers

In 2008, the “High Authority in the Fight against Discrimination and for Equality” (Halde) recorded an upsurge in complaints coming from seniors. At the same time, “anti-elderly” leagues, committees, and other groups have been posting on the internet such subjects as : “*Old Folks at the Wheel,*” “*The Elderly in the Supermarket,*” “*Can’t wait for the next heat wave!*” We might like to attribute these allegations to a passing exasperation or to a rebellious adolescent, but neither can account for the mindset so prevalent nowadays. Is there not, at present, a penchant to hide, out of sight, all signs of aging by having recourse to Melatonin, DHEA, GH, Botox and other facelifts, Viagra, and Thalasso, --and for the hopeless cases, nursing homes and euthanasia?

Who is concerned?

Indeed, if we accept *Littré’s* definition of old age as the last stage of life, starting at age sixty, although the time of this beginning may vary, “*depending on the individual’s constitution, lifestyle, and many other circumstances*” then there are some 13 million persons in France who are concerned at present. Of course, the “early retired” avidly enjoying his new “liberty” is a long way from the miserable bedridden Alzheimer patient. Rather than being based on the degrading effects of age, the definition rests essentially on the fact that elderly persons are those who have passed the age for working and are no longer considered part of the active workforce.

At any rate, our seniors represent 21.8 % of the present population of France. It is now imperative to take into account a new type of society in which the elderly are gradually outnumbering the young. From now on, the population ready to retire corresponds with the baby-boom, that is, the massive rise in births over a period of 30 years. There will be, therefore, during the next 3 decades, 380 to 450 million persons retiring each year, instead of the 200 to 280 million annual retirements of the past 10 years. “*There will be fewer young people entering the workforce than elders retiring each year. The cost of living will therefore weigh upon the shoulders of those who are actively employed,*” according to Ined.

This “inverted pyramid,” even though foreseen for several years, is a novelty for the human species and demands adequate solutions for preserving equilibrium in the economic and political domain, as well as in the social and spiritual sphere.

Intergenerational conflicts seem to be succeeding class conflicts. Are they not provoked by the younger generation's fear of not being able to support financially the needs of their elders (retirement funds and social security)? This very real economic problem introduces, consciously or not, a rejection of the elderly. If we consider the blogs that militate against the elderly, claiming that heat waves serve to palliate the problem of retirement, between that and euthanasia for economic motives, there's not much distance! On the political level there is a similar question of the role of the elderly. Being always the largest number, seniors tip the electoral balance. But do their needs always conform to the construction of the future of France?

The refusal to Die

Add to this, for many, the refusal to grow old, the search for pleasure and enjoyment before all else; and, for others, solitude and sickness. 8.6 % of the population of France is over 75. How many are on their own to cope with the anxieties of their age? Of the 13 million who are 60 and over, Insee counts a million single, as well as a million divorced, and 3.5 million widows and widowers . . . What do we offer these persons who are, for the most part, physically fragile ? Is not our disdain of old age a sign that this stage of life is viewed as shameful, burdensome, and fearful in face of inescapable death?

In his letter, on March 23 1984, John Paul II addressed the elderly with these words: *“Be not misled by the temptation to interior solitude. In spite of the complexity of your problems [....]and your waning forces, and in spite of the insufficiency of social organizations, the delays in official legislation, and the incomprehension of a self-centered society, you are not, and you must not feel, marginalized from the life of the Church, as if you were mere passive parts in a hyperactive world. No, you are active subjects living out a period of existence that is humanly and spiritually fruitful. You still have a mission to accomplish, a contribution to make.”* The Church is well aware of the important role of elderly persons. Indeed, the Church looks to the wisdom of age to which she confides the highest hierarchical functions.

Since our society is enriched by its “old folks,” they must be taken into consideration in our reflections. We must not merely give our seniors the pride of their age; we must rely on them as we construct the future. Without them, our society is at a loss for a point of reference. They are the living memory of our past. The affective, moral, and religious values enshrined in the lives of the elderly are an indispensable resource for the equilibrium of society, families, and individuals. The elderly person realizes, more than anyone else, the superiority of “being” over “doing” or “having.” Relieved of daily stress, they are no longer dominated by time and activity in the same way. They teach us patience and wisdom, gratuitousness by way of interiority, respect for creation, and

the way to build peace.

The Father Figure

“Honor your father and your mother, as the Eternal, your God, has commanded you, that you may have a long life and prosperity in the land which the Eternal, your God, is giving you.” Thus says Deuteronomy 5:16. Let’s halt the desire to kill our fathers, really or figuratively! We need this father-figure, image of the Eternal Father, who reassures and counsels us, and empowers us to raise ourselves up. The presence of such a large number of elderly persons in our contemporary world is a gift, a newfound human and spiritual enrichment. If it is fully understood and welcomed, their presence is a sign of the times capable of helping modern man to rediscover the meaning of life beyond the significance conditioned by the market, the State, and the dominant mentality of the day.

Old Age reminds us that man, no matter how weary or wounded his mind and body, maintains his dignity. Life, in each of its stages, is the greatest value, and Old Age is the supreme gift. We must cultivate intergenerational bonds to prepare our children’s future, by counting on our “active” juniors to innovate and our seniors to perpetuate. Surely, economic problems will remain, but are they not, above all, generated by the search for pleasure? Perhaps we will have to delay the age for retirement, but have not we pushed back equally the age when one is no longer able to work, and is leisure an end in itself?

With Old Age comes the stripping away of worldly illusions. It is also a slow preparation for our encounter with God.

To the rebellion against the decay of the body, we can give our contemporaries a single response of faith. Growing old has meaning only in union with God and the slow ascent of Christ to Golgotha. Here we find the unique response enabling us to resolve intergenerational conflicts, to pacify the fears of our contemporaries, and to consider respectfully the withering that comes with age.