



Engaging Aging

Elderhood for the World

By Reverend Thomas E. Clarke, SJ

In This Issue

Calendar	6
What Can We Contribute to this Time?	6
From the Offices of NRRO	7

“Faced more immediately with the end of our pilgrimage, we seniors are called to deal more, not less, intensely with the issue of what will be passed on to future generations.”

*Thomas E. Clarke, SJ
 Elderhood for the World*

The first time I realized that I was old, at least in the eyes of others, was when a young woman stood up in a crowded bus to give me her seat. Resisting that sobering message, I continued to think of the old as “they,” not “we.” The definitive change came only a few years ago at Bethany, when I was welcomed by two senior sisters of the Religious of Jesus and Mary, the congregation that sponsors this retreat house, into the ranks of “overachieving octogenarians” (O.O.’s for short).

About whom are we talking here? Seniors? Elders? The aged? The old? All of the above, perhaps, in varying degrees, but particularly those who are experiencing physically, emotionally, and/or mentally what the Jesuit paleontologist and religious thinker, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, termed “passivities of diminishment.” As Jesus, in the last scene of John’s Gospel, led Peter to anticipate, we are less in charge of our lives, more dependent on the support of others. And the prospect of death and dying lurks in the shadows. Is there a distinctive spirituality that can be fashioned from these ingredients?

Kathleen Fischer observes that “often we only realize that we have moved into the category of what society calls old when people begin to treat us differently” (*Autumn Gospel: Women in the Second Half of Life* [1995]). Her

Reverend Thomas E. Clarke, SJ, our featured author, was just shy of his 82nd birthday when this article was first published in *America*, July, 2000. Five years later, on August 14, 2005, Fr. Clarke died. We are honored to share his challenging and still timely reflections by reprinting this article. Fr. Clarke was a member of the former New York province of the Society of Jesus. Ordained in 1950, he ministered as a Jesuit priest in the fields of education, spirituality, and pastoral ministry. As a longtime writer in New York, he authored numerous articles and books and was widely recognized for his scholarship. This article was reprinted from *America*, July 29, 2000, with permission of America Press, Inc., 2016. All rights reserved.



Elderhood for the World, continued

statement reminds me that we who are in the golden years need to be wary of being stereotyped by society, not least with respect to our spirituality. For one thing, the chronological point of entry is difficult to define, and depends in part on the eye of the beholder. Often children and adolescents appear to think that senescence begins at 30. The A.A.R.P. and the various purveyors of senior discounts start at about 55 or 60. The celebrated developmental typologies (Jung, Erik Erikson, Levinson and others) are, despite the caveats of the authors themselves, sometimes made the basis of unwarranted assumptions about the later years.

Many factors, both situational and intrinsic to the individual person, will condition the possibility and the shape of spiritual growth for seniors. I may have Alzheimer's in my 60's or play tennis in my 80's. I may live with my children or grandchildren or just endure as a rarely visited resident of a nursing home. I may sleep in the same bed with a spouse of 50 years or experience the long loneliness of one never called to marriage or religious community. A retirement community in Florida or Arizona, complete with its golf course and exercise room, a demanding schedule of lecture tours or the massive infirmary of a religious community - any of these may be the setting of my search for God toward the sunset of my earthly day.

Given such variations, can chronological age alone define the characteristics of a senior spirituality? Perhaps we need to emphasize, for a change, both the uniqueness of each individual vocation and the common ground shared by all age groups. Only then may it be valid and helpful, with appropriate qualifications, to attend to what is, by and large, characteristic of the

faith life of those blessed with long years.

One overarching conviction of the present writer is that a vibrant senior spirituality will know how to tap into the insights and techniques of church and culture in our own time. We may have been born into a post-Victorian world, but like the rest of you we have just become citizens of the 21st century and of the dawning era of globalization. God is asking of us what God is asking of all: What can we learn from and what can we contribute to this time and no other? Faced more immediately with the end of our pilgrimage, we seniors are called to deal more, not less, intensely with the issue of what will be passed on to future generations.

We touch here a major point for senior spirituality. One of the most important turns of the late 20th century was the rediscovery that the Gospel, together with the spirituality derived from it, is not limited to the personal and interpersonal. That we live in a world and a church of structures and institutions that are both sinful and graced has brought to the spiritual quest a new gift and a new responsibility, both of which are shared no less by seniors than by others.

The idea is not new. Almost two decades ago Eugene Bianchi proposed that "persons in mid-life are called to make their lives more contemplative within the context of active, worldly endeavors" (*Aging as a Spiritual Journey* [1982]). He deplored the "polite banishment of the elderly from the world of politics, economics and civic life" and concluded that "the challenge to old people from today's world is...to preserve human dignity in a hostile environment." As a motto for this call of seniors he offered "Elderhood for the World."

Elderhood for the World, continued

Even at that time, many seniors were hearing the call to a societal spirituality. This movement away from narrowing privatism (not to be confused with an abandonment of contemplation) has grown by leaps and bounds. In the feminist movement, in rallies of the “right to life” initiative and in campaigns against sweatshops, the desecration of the earth, pornography and capital punishment (to name only some issues), “gray panthers” are adding a poignant but powerful presence to the ranks of the young and the middle-aged. An old friend of mine, a Sister of Mercy who in a few years will be inducted into the O.O.’s after decades in higher education and then in marriage and family counseling, has in recent years added to the latter profession several engagements in advocacy and even civil disobedience at Fort Benning. I think too of several Jesuits, some of them older than I, who through ministries of lecturing, writing and social action, embody the Society of Jesus’ commitment to faith and justice. What do examples like this say to us about stereotypes of senior spirituality?

Perhaps one thing they say is that we need to enlarge the traditional image of seniors - or at least of those for whom life’s processes have really worked - beyond that of wisdom to the more strenuous one of prophecy. The two are often in tension with each other. Wisdom speaks to us of tranquil enlightenment, an acceptance of the way things are as manifesting the divine presence. But wisdom’s sibling, prophecy, is often angry and fearful, denunciatory, upset with

Pictured right, Sister Maria Eck, a Springfield Dominican, volunteers at Mercy Communities, caring for children of at-risk mothers who are receiving services to facilitate their independence. Read more about Mercy Communities in *Just Words* at <http://springfieldop.org/resources/just-words-2/>. (Photo used with permission of the Springfield Dominicans.)

the way things are. “I looked at what is and I asked: Why? I looked at what is not and I asked: Why not?” Does the prophetic call so often felt in youth inevitably lead to a wisdom that relinquishes zeal and anger as less mature? I would rather think that both wisdom and prophecy are abiding and complementary facets of love’s integral response to the world as it is. There is a time for saying yes and a time for saying no. While a mature wisdom can save prophecy from sterile bitterness, an authentic prophetic spirit can preserve wisdom from shallowness and evasion.

All too often anger, and its partner fear, are seen only as dangerous and destructive emotions that ideally are overcome in old age. But when one realizes that they are precious gifts of God given for responsible stewardship, then



Elderhood for the World, continued

growth in handling them becomes a matter of integration rather than of transcendence. The world and the church need the mature anger and the disciplined fears of the elderly. They are essential conditions for the patience, courage and hope that bless the world in many holy seniors.

A related hazard for seniors and for those who offer them pastoral or spiritual guidance is an unnuanced interpretation of the “sacrament of the present moment” as an ideal to strive for. It is true that pain and suffering, especially physical, have a way of blocking the flow of energy that derives from memory and imagination. It is also true that these faculties are often employed by the old to their own harm, impeding attentiveness to the voice of God here and now. All of

us, old and not, need to be grateful for the 12-step wisdom of “one day at a time,” as well as for the “miracle of mindfulness” that leaders like Thich Nhat Hanh and Anthony de Mello have promoted. But when this wisdom is understood and practiced to the neglect of grateful and compunctious memory and dreaming hope, elderly Christians are deprived of two powerful sources of psychospiritual energy. Living fully in the present itself becomes more difficult when we do not also live from the past toward the future.

The traditional image of sacrament, understood as the embodiment of faith in time and space, can be helpful here. I find that Johann Baptist Metz’s analysis of hope as the retrieval of “dangerous memories” of human suffering engaged in for the sake of the future, and Walter

Retired Sisters of St Joseph of Baden, Pennsylvania, and Associates gather monthly in the dining room of the congregation’s motherhouse to prepare sandwiches for distribution by the Salvation Army of Rochester, PA. Sister Patricia Young, who serves as activities director for motherhouse sisters, reports that the gathering is both a source of community and a means of ministering to the dear neighbor. (Photo used with permission of the Baden Sisters of St. Joseph.)



Elderhood for the World, continued

Brueggemann's call for "prophetic imagination," can rescue living in the present moment from deadness. Pastoral and spiritual ministers to the elderly do well when they incorporate the healing of memories and joyful anticipation of the future into their offerings.

Yes, there is the question of death and dying. Even in the absence of congenital tendencies toward depression, the "bright promise of immortality" often seems to the elderly illusory and unconsoling. Visitors to nursing homes are sometimes shocked by a climate of what looks like despair. There is no substitute for tender care given by loved ones and ministers who really believe in resurrection and eternal life. But theology can also offer assistance. Here I am thinking of the late Karl Rahner's correction of the common error that the dead have somehow become acosmic. No, he affirmed, they are still with us, still part of our world, relating to it and to us even more intimately because they do so more consciously and more freely.

Elizabeth Johnson's beautiful book, *Friends of God and Prophets* (1999), has effectively retrieved the theme of companionship with our ancestors in faith, which for centuries, she asserts, has yielded to an unfortunate "patronage" model of our relationship with the saints in heaven. Thus viewed, the saints cease to be mediators who do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, but are, like all of us, participants in the plea of Christ Jesus himself, who "always lives to make intercession" for us (Heb. 7:25).

What does this imply for Christians facing the final struggle? It calls, I believe, for a spirituality in which intercessory prayer and a sense of comradeship in intercessory faith are paramount. If anything is clear about our desperate

and despairing world today, it is that we cannot save ourselves. Likewise clear is the special call of Christians to be beacons of hope. Intercession is a way of naming not just one form of prayer among many, but the very mission of the church in our time. Woven into the fabric of all ministry, including the ministry of peace and justice, is the communal invocation of the only One who in and through and despite our frail efforts is bringing the reign of God in and beyond history.

If intercession, then, is the name of the game, I believe that the group best fitted to lead it is the world's elders. We qualify for that role not through our wisdom or even through our prophetic gifts, if we have them, but through our special brand of poverty. In generational terms, it is we who are the *anawim*, the poor through whom God works wonders. However reduced in physical, mental, emotional powers, and whether we are still active or retired, we can model for all that intercessory offering of "prayers, works, joys and sufferings" through which the world is graced.

All this, I acknowledge, may seem an overly ambitious agenda for seniors in various stages of dissolution, but let me recall the phrase that St. Ignatius Loyola used in the constitutions he wrote for Jesuits: "each one according to the grace which the Holy Spirit has given." Not long before he died at the age of 96, my father was asked by one of my brothers just how, as a widower of several decades, he had ever managed to raise the six of us. "Joe," he replied in the brogue he had never lost, "you do what you have to do." So say we all. Spirituality - my father could not even spell the word - is, after all, the art of the possible impossible.

Calendar

September 20 - 22

- NRRO Planning and Implementation Workshop; Tampa, FL

September 23 - 25

- CMSWR Assembly; St. Louis, MO

October 9 - 12

- NCDC Conference; National Harbor, MD

October 11 - 14

- RCRI Conference; Anaheim, CA

November 1 - 2

- NRRO Workshop: *Moments of Grace: Learning to Companion Community Members with Dementia*

November 15

- NRRO and AIG Webinar at 1 PM ET on *Tips, Tricks and Tools for Safer Living at Home as We Age*

What Can We Contribute to this Time? By Sr. Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

Brother Norbert Karpfing, SM, (pictured below) a member of the Marianist order for 65 years, is not one to spend time wondering how he'll spend his day. With the precision of someone who has taught mathematics, he situates paper securely on a clipboard he has used since 1955, takes pen in hand and begins his daily practice of writing letters. These communiqués aren't the drivel of current day texts and tweets. Brother Norb's missives are about mission. Specifically, he's sending words of gratitude and requests for contributions to Catholic Day Care center in East St. Louis, IL. And he has been doing it, every day, since 1997.

That's when Brother Norb returned to East St. Louis after decades of serving in schools throughout the country. He quickly saw that the Center's financial trajectory was pretty dismal. But it's mission was critical to the future of the young children it served. Places of hope and empowerment were, and still are, few and far between in East St. Louis, an area scarred by poverty, crime, and racial struggles. Catholic Day Care center was, and still is, making a difference. And so he started, with a small list of friends and former students, to write for help. Now living in San Antonio, he's still writing, and people are still responding!

In *Engaging Aging's* feature article, Fr. Thomas Clarke writes, "Faced more immediately with the end of our pilgrimage, we seniors are called to deal more, not less, intensely with the issue of what will be passed on to future generations." Brother Norbert has taken up the challenge and is making a difference. One child, one letter at a time.

Visit <https://www.marianist.com/files/2015/08/ALIVE-Summer-15-web1.pdf>, page 8, for the full story of Brother Norbert's mission.



From the Offices of NRRO

Brother Bob Metzger, SM, Associate Director for Planning and Education

When I read the first line of Fr. Clarke's article it brought back memories of one of the times I realized I was old in the eyes of others. A few years ago I was getting my hair cut on a Saturday morning. When the barber finished cutting my hair, she offered me the senior discount for haircuts. I always thought I looked fairly young for my age but she was able to see my true age through the graying of my hair. I was able to refrain from a surprised laugh but, of course, I accepted the discount. Senior discounts are one of the advantages of our advancing years!



As religious we say we never retire. I have heard that phrase hundreds of times during the years that I have ministered at NRRO. Even though the National Religious Retirement Office has the word "retirement" in our name, we prefer to use the terminology of religious leaving their position of "full time compensated ministry". At some age in life we will move into part-time compensated ministry, volunteer ministry, a ministry of prayer or something else.

Some years ago I experienced a very unique kind of ministry offered by two sisters who had moved out of their full time compensated ministry. I was living in Dayton, OH and a member of a Marianist prayer community. Part of our outreach ministry was to attend a prayer service at the site of any person who had been murdered in the city of Dayton. Two members of the Precious Blood Sisters

in Dayton organized and held a prayer service at the site of the victim, usually within a week of the murder. They would invite the family, relatives and friends of the victim to join a gathering of people praying for the victim.

The prayer service started because the two sisters would watch the local news and make comments about the murder rate in the city. Another sister asked them what they might do about it rather than just talking about the problem. These prayer services began as a result of that conversation. During the years these services were held, the murder rate in the city of Dayton declined. It is always difficult to say if the decline in the murder rate was solely because of the awareness raised by those praying but I am sure it had a great effect on it.

I have no idea what the future holds in store for me. I am in my late 60's now and "plan" to continue my ministry for several more years. What God has in store for me is totally unknown. That is why I like the phrase that Fr. Clarke uses at the end of the article when he quotes from St. Ignatius Loyola: "*each one according to the grace which the Holy Spirit has given.*"

Join our Wisdom Circle

NRRO is continually searching for new and improved ways to be of service to religious communities regarding their care of aging members. To this end, we have created a Google Group that will enable you to receive via email a weekly notice of pertinent information in the field of aging studies. In this "Wisdom Circle," you'll also be able to communicate your questions or reflections with each other. It's simple and it's free. To join, contact Dayna Hurst at NRRO-Consult-DLHurst@usccb.org. We look forward to being in contact with you!

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