



Summer 2013

Volume 8

No. 2

# Engaging Aging

## Transitions of Aging and Leadership Roles

by Brother Seán D. Sammon, FMS

The time between the onset of midlife and the moment of death can span less than a year or more than several decades. Carl Jung described this period as life's afternoon and maintained that its developmental challenges were chiefly spiritual. Unfortunately, many of us set out on our journey into life's second half with the naïve belief that the skills and truths that served us well during life's morning will do the same as we grow older. To our dismay, we discover that that is simply not the case.

In this article we will explore the years between the early forties and the end of life and say a word about the challenges that many of us must confront as we move into midlife and the years beyond. Undoubtedly, the best time to begin preparing for life's second half is today. For as we enter into our final years, we discover that the question that confronts is not, "What does it mean to die?" but rather, "What does it mean to have lived a life?" The task of formulating a response to this query can never begin too early.

### Developmental challenges of midlife

As we enter midlife, we face three developmental challenges: developing greater care for others; growing in self-intimacy; and becoming more effective in ministry. Addressing the first task is crucial because at midlife we often find ourselves caught between two generations and having some responsibility for both. Adding to our stress is the fact that we usually have little say in choosing those who will be

### In This Issue

Resources for Review	6
Editor's Desk	6
Offices of NRRO	7
Calendar	7
Announcements and Reminders	7

*"What was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie."*

*Carl Jung*

### Brother Seán D. Sammon, FMS

Brother Seán has ministered for twenty-two years in congregational leadership of the Marist Brothers as Superior General, Vicar General, and Provincial of a United States Province. Other administrative experience includes serving as President of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, Board member of Marist College, and International Clinical Director of House of Affirmation. He has also minis-

tered as a teacher, counselor, and consultant to religious and other groups and organizations.

Brother Seán holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Fordham University and is presently Scholar-in-Residence at Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York. He has authored numerous books and articles on the subject of religious life.



## Transitions of Aging and Leadership Roles, continued

placed in our charge or how the task of caring for them is to be carried out.



As the number of older religious has increased, those in middle age have struggled to find creative ways in which to meet their needs. So also, they have felt stretched by the many demands and responsibilities placed upon them. This situation is particularly difficult for those in a leadership role. Provincials, for example, can feel overwhelmed as they face the growing demands of their congregations' works in the face of dwindling finances, aging membership, and the personal needs of many who make up the group.

Mentoring relationships offer us a unique opportunity at midlife to expand our ability to care for others. Mentors aid young people by providing them with encouragement and a life worthy of emulation. To begin with, mentors can help older people rediscover parts of themselves lost when they made earlier decisions. For example, the President of a religious congregation can be most helpful to one of her sisters in search of a "second career" by offering encouragement during a difficult time. To do all the work of search and exploration for this woman, however, would be a betrayal of the mentoring role and only serve to infantilize the sister seeking a new direction in life. Midlife mentors need to be guides and supports, not rescuers and saviors.

Around age forty we are also confronted with a need to develop more fully our interior life. Called to

leave the often compulsive and unreflective aspects of our apostolic lives, we begin to explore in more depth the world within. Experiences such as a renewal experience or the death of a parent can be triggers that set this process in motion. As we come to know ourselves more fully we realize that it is important to include ourselves among those whom we call friends. The gift of self-intimacy is truly one of the blessings of midlife.

Finally, at midlife we are given the chance to become more effective in our ministries. We often are called upon to use our talents in a new way and to move away from the role of a student to that of a leader. This change in role increases our effectiveness in ministry.

### The later years of life

As we move through our late fifties and into our early sixties, a number of us notice a slight decline in our physical and mental abilities. In the face of these changes, people react in different ways. Some accept them as part of the aging process and turn their attention to maintaining good health. Others, however, are offended by any suggestion that they might be 'slowing down.' Most people about age sixty rightly believe that they still have a great deal to offer and anticipate a number of productive years ahead.

Personality and long-standing ways of approaching life determine, in part, our way of dealing with aging and events such as retirement. Those among us who spent early and midlife involved in ministry to such an extent that we failed to develop our personal and spiritual life, can begin to feel cheated. In contrast, those who struggled to maintain a balance between ministry, relationships, and spirituality throughout life usually look forward to the additional time that a reduced ministry schedule will provide.

The transition into the later years of life has three distinct parts: leaving middle adulthood; crossing the line; and entering late adulthood. Each of them is distinct and has its own characteristic features. As we leave middle adulthood we often find ourselves beginning to make an evaluation about our lives.

## Transitions of Aging and Leadership Roles, continued

Knowing that we have lived already more years than the number that lie ahead for us, we wonder if we have achieved the goals we established and set about to resolve any conflicts that exist regarding failures and disappointments. As we conclude the middle years, we need to be living with integrity. We take responsibility for our life, insert meaning into it, and actively accept the inevitability of our own life course. Moving into the final chapter of life, we realize that whatever its shape, our life needs to be a genuine expression of our central nature, beliefs, values, dreams.

Finally, we prepare for the inevitable decline that accompanies old age by simplifying our way of living and reflecting more immediately on what it means to die. Thoughts about death, however, inevitably lead to questions about what it means to have lived.



It is always the elders who show younger generations the adequacy of their culture. The real fear of death is not the loss of one's life but rather the loss of meaning. If a particular commitment can sustain people throughout their lives and into old age,

the value of that commitment is confirmed for all. Erik Erikson observed that healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death.

Currently, older sisters, brothers, and priests are challenged to contribute to the next generation in ways that they might not have anticipated. Instead of building upon models of aging that were common in

years past, they need to create a new one. In facing personal mortality, they have little choice but to surrender familiar roles as well as illusions they harbor about themselves and the world in which they are living. They must accept inevitable declines in memory and physical health.

More importantly, they have an opportunity to accept and mourn the demise of an older form of religious life. Having lived many of their days within a structure that, to a large extent, no longer exists, these men and women might be tempted to despair. They can, instead, make a significant contribution to the future by letting go of past forms, embracing the process of mourning, and permitting themselves to be converted through it.

### Crossing the line

Retirement from ministry is the single most important event that moves us from the middle to the late adult years. As part of the process, old and familiar roles are surrendered or adapted in a more flexible manner and new ones adopted. A once active woman religious elementary school teacher, for example, tries now to use her time for tutoring and home visits to seniors.

For retirement to take place smoothly, preparation should begin many years before this event gets underway. To begin with, we need to recognize retirement as a possibility and begin to shape our future with that fact in mind. Next, we need to take active steps to prepare for this event. Finally, we need to make a formal decision about when we will retire and how we will do so.

Retirement, though, is also a transitional process. Preparing for it entails far more than planning one's future. We must also deal with our past and slowly detach ourselves from our work roles and those familiar people and places that tie us to a particular ministry. We must spend time in the fallow emptiness that always marks the heart of any transition.

Getting ready for retirement includes the process of anticipatory grieving. Few find it easy to leave active ministry with all the social and emotional ties that go



## Transitions of Aging and Leadership Roles, continued

with it. We would do well to begin this process well in advance by reading up on retirement, talking with others about the topic, and developing our personal interests, relationships, and spiritual life.

### Adjusting to the time after retirement



Retirement should not be equated with the cessation of ministry. Many retired men and women remain involved in familiar apostolic activities; others quickly take up new ones.

There are many myths about health and the incidence of death after retirement. In reality, people who fall into this category appear to be as healthy or even healthier after they stop working than they were before. Furthermore, retirement does not appear to have a direct effect on mortality or on the frequency of social and psychological problems among older priests, sisters, and brothers. Some of us adjust well to retirement; others, unfortunately, do not.

### The final years of life

As most of us move into the final years of life, we find that physical and mental decline often becomes more rapid and chronic and catastrophic illness more common. Progressing into our eighties, we begin to lose most of our remaining social roles and any status that came with them. At this time we are also confronted with three tasks: coping with impaired health; making adjustments in our living situation so as to provide for any necessary care; and dealing with the increased fre-

quency of death among friends and relatives.

The prevalence of chronic disease increases with age. Approximately 85 percent of people sixty-five years or older and living outside of institutions suffer from at least one chronic illness. About 50 percent report some limitation of their normal activities because of a chronic health condition. Although heart disease is the most frequently reported disability, arthritis, diabetes, varicose veins, asthma, hernias, obesity, hemorrhoids, cataracts, hypertension, and prostate disease are common. A number of elder people also suffer a debilitating accident after some sudden change in their life gives rise to a crisis. Hip fractures among older people, for example, are often related to real or imagined losses such as retirement, illness, or the death of a close friend.

Physical and mental health also appear to be closely related among the elderly. Many neurotic disorders can present themselves as physical disabilities. An elderly woman religious, for example, may manifest her depression in these symptoms: a loss of energy, poor appetite, weight loss, and constipation. Depression is probably the chief psychological difficulty experienced by older men and women religious. For many, it leads to a decrease in their involvements and gives rise to a gloomy evaluation of their present state and future possibilities and strong self-accusations and guilt over past transgressions.

Paranoid reactions are another common pathological disturbance seen during the latter years of life. People afflicted with this disorder are suspicious of persons and events around them. At times, they put together faulty and unrealistic explanations of what happens to them. This distortion of reality is due most often to their effort to fill in the gaps in their memory and to deny some of the losses that come with aging.

An excessive preoccupation with bodily functions or hypochondriasis is still another disability common among older people. Feeling a need to be taken care of, they find that having physical complaints is one way to meet this need.

## Transitions of Aging and Leadership Roles, continued

### Organic brain syndrome

A number of people sixty-five and older with significant mental deficits have an organic brain syndrome. They may be unable to remember what day it is or even where they are living. As their condition progresses, self-care can deteriorate, they may begin to lose their way, well learned material from earlier in life disappears, and the names of familiar people cannot be recalled.

### Final remarks

Attitude and our determination to remain active play a significant role in our ability to deal with impairments in health. Growing older, we also need a reasonably stable, familiar, and supportive living situation if we are to continue to function at an optimal level.

We need to be creative and realistic in planning for the final years of life. Past models of care for religious are often unsuitable for today. Congregations can share expertise and contain costs by working together on some living ventures. Such an approach would also help us avoid duplication of services and provide a greater variety of living situations for our older members. Among the many factors that will determine the specifics of suitable living arrangements for elder religious are the age and health of the group's members, their geographical location, available opportunities for limited ministry, and financial resources.

How can leaders in religious congregations be of help when the time comes for members to move from a more active living situation to one more appropriate for their years and health? Making this change calls for a chain of five decision-making steps. First of all, ask, "Must this move be made? Can this person continue to be maintained in his or her current environment?" Answering these two questions is often the most difficult step in the process of helping an older person accept the need to move. Change frightens most of us; for many elders, the thought is terrifying. Oftentimes, the memories and relationships associated with elders' sense of value and the contributions they've made are tied up with the physical attributes of the place where they live and/or work.

Second, if change is called for then other living arrangements need to be investigated. Making a list of all possible options can be helpful. For some, moving to a community with more support services is the best option. For others, it can mean relocating to a community with an elevator.

Third, after weighing the alternatives, a choice needs to be made and a way of implementing it found. Older people need to be prepared for the move that they will make. In addition to sorting belongings, they need to spend time saying goodbye.

Fourth, people need to be initiated into their new living situation. Familiarity with physical layout and schedules are important to adjustment.

Finally, as people become integrated into their new living situation, they will go through a period of adjustment. Some may initially withdraw from the group or spend more time sleeping. Still others may regress and make excessive demands for help. Others will channel their energies into activities.

### Conclusion

Living into the later years of life, we discover that it is a time for conversion. We have the opportunity to let go of old self-images and understandings, but also to discover new ones. As we lose loved ones to death and surrender familiar roles and even places of residence, the meaning of life is more apparent and the consequences of earlier decisions clearer. As we complete the work of this chapter of life, we grow to accept more fully one of life's most significant learnings: at the heart of all human and spiritual growth is Christianity's central paradox that we must die in order to rise anew. Reassured by this knowledge, we are at last able to own deeply, without cynicism or sentiment, the person that we are.



## Resources for Review

### BOOKS

Ebener, Dan R. (2012). *Blessings for Leaders: Leadership Wisdom from the Beatitudes*. Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minnesota.

Pargament, Kenneth I. (2007). *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*. Guilford Press: New York.

Thibault, Jane Marie, and Morgan, Richard L. (2012). *The Pilgrimage into the Last Third of Life*. Upper Room Books: Nashville.

### ARTICLES

DeSchryver Mueller, Celeste. (2012). Dynamics of Transformational Leadership. *Human Development*, 33(4).

DeSchryver Mueller, Celeste. (2011). Leading Change. *Human Development*, 32(3).

Dougherty, Mary Ellen. (2013). Leadership Today: A Way of Purification. *Human Development*, 34(1).

Garvin, Mary Pat. (2013). Graced Companionship: A Metaphor for Religious Leadership Today. Address at Union of International Superiors General Plenary Assembly, Rome. Available online at: [http://www.mercyworld.org/uploads/cknw/files/2013/conf\\_uisg\\_garvin\\_2013\\_en.pdf](http://www.mercyworld.org/uploads/cknw/files/2013/conf_uisg_garvin_2013_en.pdf)

Schuster, Joanne. (2012). Quantum Leadership of Religious Congregations: A Model for Interesting Times. *Human Development*, 33(4).

**“May blessings be upon the head of Cadmus, the Phoenicians, or whoever it was that invented books.”**

Thomas Carlyle

## From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.



Nothing draws the eye to leadership like a congregational chapter. As elections draw near, prayer and discerning conversations begin to focus on the needs of the community and the gifts being called forth. These are challenging times in religious life and important decisions need to be made about who

best might assume positional leadership. It could be said that our world has an intimate stake in the outcomes.

Some find it amazing that in one day during chapter elections, we create leaders by virtue of a vote. I tend to think it's more significant to realize that we continue to influence each other for years in terms of our expectations and perceptions.

So, given the relational nature of our lives, what are the holy conversations we need to have together? How can we speak openly about our hopes and fears as we consider our lives in community? From the eldest to the youngest member, what is it that connects and energizes us? What keeps us apart? What consequences will the community suffer if leaders run too far ahead with visioning or members lag behind in resigned complacency? How can we help each other face the challenging transitions of aging and still kindle our longing for life? How do we tend the very real need for increasing supports in our living and still turn our eyes to the people we desire to serve?

Belden Lane speaks of desire as an energy that holds all of creation in relationship; as a universal allure-ment that draws us into mystery. Perhaps, if we can name that common desire among us, we will name our power. From that wellspring called 'charism' we will be able to name the leadership that awaits emergence in our midst; for who and how we are as community will determine who and how our leaders are called to be.

*With gratitude to Sister Agnes Mary Russo, CSJ, whose quiet fidelity and kindness have taught me why leadership exists.*



## From the Offices of NRRO, Brother Robert Metzger, SM

### Associate Director for Planning and Education



This past March I turned 64 and it struck me that I am only one year away from being eligible for Medicare! I spent some time that day reflecting on my 45 years as a Marianist and wondering where the time has gone. I would not like to return to an earlier year in my life as I enjoy who I am, where I

am, what I am doing, and all the parts that make up my life. I do reflect on what the future holds for me and realize it is in the hands of God so I do not have any worries. That is something that is easy to say but not always easy to live.

In the National Religious Retirement Office we see and hear on a daily basis the many concerns of religious members and leaders about aging, quality of life and finances for retired members. One of the ways we try to assist is to provide education around these concerns. Brother Seán's article is one form of this education.

Seán discusses the issues we face as we approach mid-life, move past that into our later years and then to our time after retirement. As he says, our personality and how we live our life will help determine how we each deal with aging and life after retirement. These are concerns for each of us and for the leaders of our religious institutes.

Know that the National Religious Retirement Office is here to assist leaders and members of religious institutes. And, as always, we ask you to continue to remember the donors to the Retirement Fund for Religious for their generosity to this collection. Without their assistance this office would not be able to exist.

Please let us hear from you if you have any topics you'd like us to address in coming issues of *Engaging Aging*. We wish everyone a safe and relaxing summer.

## Calendar

### June 2013

14 Direct Care Assistance checks were mailed

### August 2013

7-10 CMSM Assembly, Nashville, TN

13-16 LCWR Assembly, Orlando, FL

20 NRRO webinar at 1:00 PM EDT

### September 2013

24-26 NRRO Planning and Implementation

## Announcements and Reminders

### Position Opening

The Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI) has begun a search for a new Executive Director. If you are interested in applying or would like additional information about the position, please see the RCRI website at: <http://www.trcri.org/EDsearch.php>

### Article Available Online

The original article Brother Seán Sammon, FMS, wrote for this issue of *Engaging Aging* exceeded the space available in our layout. We have posted the article in its entirety on our website. We encourage you to access the full version at: <http://www.usccb.org/about/national-religious-retirement-office/resources/upload/Transitions-in-Aging.pdf>

If you do not have internet access in your congregation and would like a printed copy of the article, please send a note to: Brother Bob Metzger, SM, National Religious Retirement Office, 3211 Fourth Street, NE, Washington, DC, 20017-1194

**U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops**  
National Religious Retirement Office  
3211 4th Street N.E.  
Washington, DC 20017-1194

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
USCCB

**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**



## National Religious Retirement Office

Sponsor of the Retirement Fund for Religious

**3211 4th Street, NE**  
**Washington, DC 20017-1194**

**Phone:** (202) 541-3215

**Fax:** (202) 541-3053

**Email:** [retirement@usccb.org](mailto:retirement@usccb.org)

**Websites:**

[www.usccb.org/nrro](http://www.usccb.org/nrro)

[www.retiredreligious.org](http://www.retiredreligious.org)

The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these funds to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs. Our mission is to support, educate, and assist religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

### Staff

**Executive Director**

Sister Janice Bader, CPPS

[jbader@usccb.org](mailto:jbader@usccb.org)

**Associate Director of Fund Distribution**

Brother Hank Sammon, FMS, JCL

[hsammon@usccb.org](mailto:hsammon@usccb.org)

**Associate Director for Planning and Education**

Brother Bob Metzger, SM

[rmetzger@usccb.org](mailto:rmetzger@usccb.org)

**Program Specialist**

Monica Glover

[mglover@usccb.org](mailto:mglover@usccb.org)

**Administrative Assistant**

Tiffany Lezama

[tlezama@usccb.org](mailto:tlezama@usccb.org)