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Engaging Aging

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“Old age is, as I like to say, the seat of life’s wisdom.

...like good wine that improves with age, let us give life’s wisdom to the young.”

*Pope Francis
March 15, 2013*

Is there a Spirituality of Aging?

By Reverend John C. Haughey, SJ

First, a caveat for readers. I have no idea what a spirituality of aging is or is meant to be, or whether there is such a thing. The topic is unattractive to me. It smacks of some recondite sociology that is trying to make itself necessary for religious people who are old. (Of course, it might be that my scorn for the category is due to self-denial about my own aging.) So if the reader is interested in the spirituality of aging, please accept my negative attitude about the topic and ponder several thoughts that come to my mind which may be apropos.

Communion of Saints

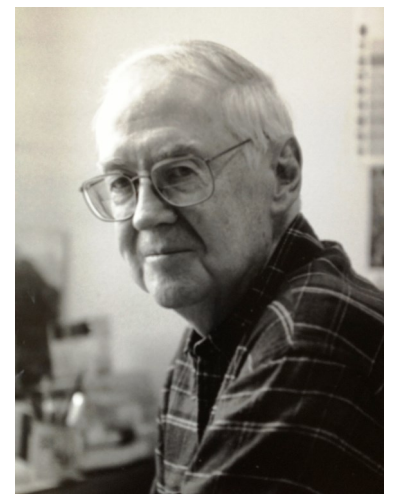
The older one is, the more likely he or she would want to qualify for becoming part of a population that has success written all over it. The population I have in mind are “the saints.” I find that the older I get the more attractive this belief is about the communion of saints; not so much individual saints in the communion, but the collective. I also find myself imagining it less peopled by the haloed and more and more by people I knew and experienced as one of us. After their departure from life, they seem less visible and less present, but still ‘one of the folks’ I know.

So one of the pluses of aging seems to be an ability to grow in the desire to be part of them. That piece of the pastiche of our faith feels less and less like an abstract

Reverend John C. Haughey, SJ

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costalism and World Evangelical Alliance. Father Haughey holds a Doctorate in Sacred Theology from Catholic University of America. A widely published author, his scholarship has focused on university education with an emphasis on the meaning of what constitutes the catholic intellectual tradition.



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belief, and more and more like a reality. But, instead of the communion *of* saints, the operative word should be communion *with* the saints.

As some wag put it, “Some things you never learn; you just grow older and then you know.” Another way to put it: faith is like fruit that ripens as it ages. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews notes, “Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things unseen.” This statement is, to say the least, paradoxical... meaning it is as close to being contradictory as it is to being very meaningful. So, belief in the communion of saints can ripen into something closer to realization, the older one gets. When one is younger, life looks and feels like a bundle of possibilities, the least of which is communion with the saints. It is too other worldly and remote.

But faith can ripen into sensing that there is a communion with people who have walked with you and who are now experienced as living in an elite group of folks whom God has brought into “perpetual light.” They have not forgotten us who are still car-

rying the weight of flesh, space and time and whose faith light flickers. Those in that inner circle of perpetual light are now part of “them” but are still part of us. So having the experience of communion with them brings this belief closer to a “realization” than merely something “hoped for.” They become a more tangible “evidence” about what faith can ripen into. Their presence in our future brings what is believed closer to being actualized.

I had just turned fourteen when my mother died. My experience of her after her death was, in a way, more tangible than when she was living. I never had a thought about what this “communion of saints” thing was until after her death. Even then it took me a while to make a connection between that belief and what was very real about her new way of being my mother. For me, she wasn’t dead, for sure. Though she wasn’t visible, she was not absent.

Faith and hope as great attractors

But let’s go back to this thing that is paradoxical about faith and how it can produce more than a hope about something future to us. The “real” is what faith brings us to, not away from. The lack of faith brings us to nothing, or to something fatuous going nowhere. And what we hope for, which faith has conveyed to our minds and hearts, doesn’t dupe us. Faith and hope interact with one another, the one filling out what the other lures the believer into. God generates in us an attraction for a fuller communion with those we have known and loved.

Of course, faith and hope and love are inseparables. Making them virtues that we have to practice is a superficial rendering of them by comparison to what is deeper and more central to what God would have us think. Yes, of course, faith, hope and love are virtues to be practiced, but theologically and foundationally they are what has been “done unto us” by



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God out of love. God gave the hopeful faith and the faithful hope and the love to act on these. Yes we should also unpack what God has done unto us and end up with the three virtues that we have to do back to God. But first things first!

All of this brings me to thinking about the Eucharist and back to the Hebrews assertion quoted above. The connection between the two is this: the faith that the faithful bring to the Eucharist is why what they receive is not Christ hoped for but the body of Christ actually present to them and consumable. And not the blood of Christ they hope will be effective for their salvation but it's affecting their salvation now in the consumption of it. Their faith is why there is a "realization" here and now of what they hoped for in coming to the table of the Lord. They are not only partaking of this sacrament, they are participants in the confecting of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Further, as the text puts it, they become the "evidence" - empirically verifiable, sociologically identifiable - of what otherwise would be unseen and invisible.

Without the evidence of being concelebrants with one another in this Eucharistic act which actualizes the faith, and doing so again and again, the story of faith can become a tall tale told by a fool. In Macbeth's despairing words, unwitnessed faith can make it seem like "life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Solidarity with saints and earth

But one of the ignorant disjoints that this belief in the communion of saints can generate is that earth seems left behind, that nature is simply instrumental for getting to this heavenly other-where. The communion of and with the saints needs to be conjoined with the virtue of solidarity. Solidarity with the saints must

be connected to solidarity with earth and its present doings, un-doings and needs.

The person who brought solidarity front and center to the world's and the church's attention was Pope John Paul II. He lifted it to the stature of a virtue, even putting it on a par with the virtue of *caritas*. His description of solidarity: it is "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good... i.e. to the good of all and of each individual because we are really responsible for all (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #38)." He wasn't talking abstractly. In an earlier encyclical (*Laborem Exercens*, 1981) he had treated solidarity more as a worker phenomenon, obviously reflecting his experience in Poland; how the communality of workers in the Gdansk shipyards eventually brought the totalitarian reign of Polish communism to its demise.

Historical context

Putting this emergence of solidarity on a timeline, the first insights into the importance of it developed in ancient Greece. The commons that was the city-state was seen as the place for human flourishing. As with many ancient peoples, personhood was first and foremost social. "I" emerged from "we" only slowly in the course of history. Now the opposite is the case; "we" has to be striven for since individuality is the predominant energy. The scriptures, of course, have inveighed against individualism before such a thing was even imaginable.

Church teaching has been trying to fight unrelieved individualism since its emergence with the Enlightenment. A few examples: the 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* was the first of the modern social

Solidarity with the saints must be connected to solidarity with earth and its present doings, un-doings, and needs

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teachings. In 1961 the good pope, John XXII, in his *Mater et Magister* examined solidarity in terms of the common good which he defined as “the sum total of conditions of social living whereby persons are enabled more fully and readily to achieve their own perfection (#65).” In 1965, the Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes* articulated a panoramic document about solidarity. “This solidarity must be constantly increased until that day on which it will be brought to perfection. Then, saved by grace, men (n.b.) will offer flawless glory to God.” (It was too ecclesially construed there, it seems to me.)

Pope John Paul developed the understanding of solidarity much more universally than the Council had. But what is interesting is that by the time his *Sollicitudo* encyclical came along, John Paul had widened his lens about who and what was to be included in the purview of this virtue. These were to be not only persons and human rights, but the collectivities of peoples and nations. Even more capaciously, his range now included “respect for the beings which constitute the natural world.” Consequently, “one must take into account the nature of each being and its mutual connection in an ordered system which is precisely the cosmos (#34).” In other words, the older John Paul got the greener he became.

Communion as lived embrace

I remember an interesting conversation I had with a young Congolese Jesuit about heaven. I asked him where, in his own and in his tribe’s experience, the dead are? He said simply, “they are where we are, in the same flora and fauna we live in.” These people have the same faith as we western Christians, but the localizing of heaven into some other-where isn’t what they have conjured up. Hence, they do not experience the distancing between themselves and their “faithful departed” as we do. The virtue of solidarity, therefore, is a natural for them because they enfold into the same embrace communion with the deceased, relations with

one another and with the natural world they inhabit. So who counts as more sophisticated - them or us? Will growth in the virtue of solidarity get us to re-examine our projecting of a heaven up there somewhere?

Vocation of Aging

Apropos of this essay, rather than there being a spirituality of aging, it seems that it takes time for spirituality to become mature, both in individuals and in the Church itself. So the challenge for those who are religious people, who are maturing - and maybe even more grandly, the vocation of the aging - is to enact, bear witness to, and articulate a solidarity between heaven and earth. The communion of saints as a mature item of belief is in need of adding a communion with earth and the things of earth. Until these two items are in a greater synchronicity, our Christian spirituality will be immature or in need of further development. One might even say that we Christians are still babes in the woods who need to know we are part of the woods we are in. This is where we are and will always be.

Questions for Possible Discussion

- How would you describe a spirituality of aging?
- What does the communion of saints look like to you?
- Where are the dead in your experience?
- How are faith and hope operative in your life now?
- In what ways is your life giving witness to this concept of solidarity?
- What’s your opinion about individualism in religious life these days?
- What would you like to tell the members of your religious community about aging?

Resources

BOOKS

Geissler, Eugene S. (1988). *The Best is Yet to Be: Life's Meaning in the Aging Years*. Ave Maria Press.

Huston, Paula (2012). *Ten Spiritual Practices for Embracing a Happier Second Half of Life*. Loyola Press.

Ingram, Kristen Johnson (2003). *Wine at the End of the Feast: Embracing Spiritual Change as You Age*. Loyola Press.

McDonnell, Rea, SSND, and Callahan, Rachel, CSC (2000). *Harvest Us Home: Good News as We Age*. St. Anthony Messenger Press.

Missinne, Leo (2013). In *This Life: Spiritual Growth and Aging*. Ligouri Publications.

Van Breemen, SJ, Peter (2005). *Summoned at Every Age: Finding God in our Later Years*. Ave Maria Press.

Weinstein, Arnold (2011). *Morning, Noon, and Night: Finding the Meaning of Life's Stages through Books*. Random House.

ARTICLES

Hansen, Ron (2004). The School of the Heart. *America Magazine*, 190 (5).

Maloney, CM, Robert P. (2009). On Selling the Chalices. Reflections on aging in light of Vincentian Spirituality available online at: <http://cmglobal.org/vincentiana/cgi-bin/library.cgi?e=q-000-00---0vincenti--00-0-0--0prompt-10---4-----0-11--1-es-50---20-help-wake--00031-001-1-0windowsZz-1250-00&a=d&c=vincenti&cl=search&d=HASH3cecf92f192d7cb0736c12>

Watkins, Steven R. (2005). Diminishment and the Teilhardian Vision. Chapter 3 in *Teilhard de Charadin's View of Diminishment and the Late Stories of Flanery O'Connor*. Available online at : <http://dspace.uta.edu/bitstream/handle/10106/424/umi-uta-1153.pdf;jsessionid=BD5F15994A2BEC3E39EAC63DB25E4AFC?sequence=1>

VIDEO

Fischer, Kathleen (2008). *How Aging can be a Spiritual Journey*. Lecture available online at : <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/fischer/>

Dear brother Cardinals, take courage! Half of us are advanced in age. Old age is—as I like to say—the seat of life's wisdom. The old have acquired the wisdom that comes from having journeyed through life, like the old man Simeon, the old prophetess Anna in the Temple. And that wisdom enabled them to recognize Jesus. Let us pass on this wisdom to the young: like good wine that improves with age, let us give life's wisdom to the young. I am reminded of a German poet who said of old age: "*Es ist ruhig, das Alter, und fromm*" - it is a time of tranquility and prayer. And also a time to pass on this wisdom to the young.

Pope Francis, Audience with the College of Cardinals, March 15, 2013

From the Editor's Desk, Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

Last week, I walked into my mom's room in a nursing home to find her on the floor. Ninety-four years of age, feet twisted in the wheelchair, leg gashed open, head resting underneath the bedside table, she reached out and asked me to help her get up. "Oh, I'm so disappointed," she said. "I was almost up. I didn't want anyone to know I fell."

Really? Forty minutes later she was sitting back in the chair, leg bandaged, ice pack on the growing lump on her head, eating a frosty from Wendy's. I, on the other hand, was about to be sick. Her fault, their fault - who knows? At this point, what's to be gained by the argument? It was an accident, and accidents happen with increasing frequency as we get older.

So what's the problem? Call me weak, call me innocent, I'm just not accustomed to finding my mom on the floor. I'm not used to seeing her living in a space that is smaller than any convent room I've ever been in. Linoleum floors, plastic trays, open trash cans, worn furniture, moans and cries in the distance, walkers, wheel chairs, and wall-mounted hand cleaners, IV poles and geri-chairs at mass: none of it is part of my memory bank with mom.

This is my mom who proudly remembers hosting Archbishop Fulton Sheen back in the day; has served as deanery, diocesan and state president of the National Council of Catholic Women; has given life to

six children and empowered us to reach for any star we chose; was married to my dad for 60 years until he died in 2001; is grandmother, great-grandmother, and at the rate she's going, could easily live to be great-great grandmother. We often said that if she'd been born a bit later, she could have been the corporate chair of Coca-Cola Company, an icon for any southerner. Instead, she rests in a long term care facility, with precious little on the horizon.



Right now, I don't know that there is a spirituality of aging. Its consequences feel mean, hard, and unfair. For twenty years I've worked as an advocate for elders. I've preached retreats throughout North America about the spiritual blessings and challenges of elderhood. I've consulted with congregations about designing plans for retirement, ensuring adequate facilities for aging members. And still, I can't keep my own mom off the floor of a nursing home.

Religious communities are up to their eyeballs in this issue of aging. And do you know what I think? We are blessed; blessed to have institutions and communities to facilitate and lobby for our members' care. But is that enough? Maybe it's time to expand our voice of influence. Can we widen our circle of concern and advocacy to include the care provided for elders everywhere?

In his closing remarks, John Haughey, SJ, writes in this issue: "We Christians are still babes in the woods who need to know we are part of the woods we are in." Take a look around. Who's in the woods with us? How can we help?

Send me your thoughts at swhitenrro@gmail.com

Pictured left, my mom, Gladys C. White, welcoming Archbishop Fulton Sheen to Jacksonville, Florida.



Announcements, Reminders, and Calendar

Free Resources from NRRO

Webinar: On August 20, the National Religious Retirement Office and the Avila Institute of Gerontology co-sponsored a webinar, *Understanding Dementia and the Approaches that Work*, presented by Philip McCallion, ACSW, Ph.D. **A recorded version of this webinar is now available at no cost to members of religious institutes.** To request a free copy, please complete this online order form available at: <http://survey.constantcontact.com/survey/a07e85isg2ehlduusj3/a017whlo6uj44/questions>

Webinar: November 18, 2013, 1:00 EST.

Presenter: Sister Susan Schorsten, HM

Topic will be announced via email in early October, 2013. Please check to be sure that you are on **our mailing list**.

Annotated Bibliography: Sister Marie Michelle Walsh, SSND, professor emerita of English at Notre Dame of Maryland University, is developing an annotated bibliography for NRRO. It will include various works on aging and spirituality. This resource, that will continue to develop over time, is available on our website at <http://www.usccb.org/about/national-religious-retirement-office/resources/upload/Annotated-Bibliography-on-Aging-and-Retirement.pdf>.

We encourage you to access this resource and to let us know of any works that you feel would be valuable for us to add to the list. Please send your suggestions to NRRO, Attention Tiffany Lezama (tlezama@usccb.org)

Calendar

September 24 - 26

- NRRO Planning and Implementation Workshop, Marriottsville, MD

October 10 - 13

- CMSWR Annual Meeting

October 22 - 25

- RCRI Annual Conference

November 19

- NRRO/Avila Institute Webinar @ 1:00 PM EST

Announcements and Reminders

Help NRRO Go Green

If you are not already receiving this newsletter electronically and would like to do so, please contact us at retirement@usccb.org to have your e-mail address added to our distribution list.

Help Us Keep in Touch with You

Please send changes in address, phone, E-mail or congregational leadership to NRRO Tiffany Lezama, (tlezama@usccb.org) so that we may keep our records and mailing lists updated.

Copy and Circulate

We want to remind you that anyone is free to copy and circulate *Engaging Aging*. Help us to expand our reach and serve new people.

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