



# Engaging Aging

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## Mary as Our Pioneer in Aging

by Sister Rea McDonnell, SSND

Advent gives us a jump start. It is a new year! We grow older, hopefully in wisdom and grace as well as in years. In this season we celebrate the humanity of Jesus, the Word made flesh. He is like us in all things, but he never did grow old. How then, can Jesus pioneer for us the joys and sorrows of the aging process?

In reflecting on our own aging process, we might want to learn from Jesus' grandparents, using our religious imaginations as did those in the early church-community. How might Anne or Joachim, as they named these parents of Mary, have found God, in their joy with the holy family, and even in their limits and diminishments? In our prayer, we can ask them. And then, be quiet and listen.

Mary too can be our pioneer in aging. Some thirty years after the nativity, so much on display this season, she was filled again with the power of the Holy Spirit and anointed with fire, zeal for the good news her Son had preached and died for.

We can, using our imaginations in prayer, *(Continued on page 2)*

# Joy

*is the true gift  
of Christmas...  
We can transmit  
this joy simply:  
with a smile...  
a kind gesture...  
some small help,  
with forgiveness.*

*Pope Benedict XVI*

*Rea McDonnell is a School Sister of Notre Dame, Atlantic-Midwest province. She has taught every level from second grade to masters' programs preparing women and men for ministry. Currently she teaches a college course to women in prison, while offering spiritual direction in her home in Silver Spring, MD. Her latest book is Into the Heart of Mary (Ave Maria) and her next book, From Glory to Glory, will be published in February, 2011, by New City Press.*



***Mary as Our Pioneer in Aging*** (Continued from page 1)

wonder about Mary's later life through Ignatian contemplation, setting various scenes with our senses and feelings, joining Mary in her own growing in wisdom and grace. Ponder the upper room in your heart where she gathers with 120 frightened friends. After Pentecost, what gifts of the Spirit impelled her? Where, what, how was her mission? How did she serve the community and witness to those interested in her son? How did she pray? Ask her. Listen.

On Pentecost, she would have received the same energy and power of the Spirit as the Twelve. She did not return to Nazareth to darn socks! Legend puts her in Ephesus in Asia Minor, now western Turkey. This was the supposed home of John the apostle, and the city where Paul spent the most time as a Christian missionary. Scholars, however, tend to think that Mary stayed in Jerusalem.

No matter which city could claim her mission, ministry and presence, she was aging with grace and with zeal for the good news that her son embodied. Her passion, her zeal would have deepened even as her body diminished. Perhaps her eyes dimmed, and she did not have glasses; her hearing weakened, and there were no hearing aids. She slept on a mat on the floor in all kinds of climate, without central heating or air conditioning. Arthritis could have gnawed at her joints and still she climbed off that mat day after day to move among the people, or to welcome them into her home. As Jesus is our pioneer, so Mary is our pioneer as she grew, not only in wisdom and grace, but also in age.

As we reflect on the physical pain, the limits and losses of our own aging, what joys have balanced us? From her youth, Mary pondered all things in her heart, reflected on her experience and so grew more wise as she aged. How have we been growing in wisdom to this point? How did that happen? Mary, not at all a plastic statue riding on our dashboards but like us in all things human, would have experienced all that we have. We can put our experience in dialogue with hers.

Remember a relationship, an event from long past, or an episode or feeling from yesterday. Then, ask Mary whether she experienced anything like that. Listen. Then talk it over with her.

Ask Mary to share her aging process, its joys and sorrows, with you. How did she pray as she aged? How did her prayer change? How did her gifts for mission deepen, even if she was bed-ridden? Whom did she comfort? Who did she challenge? (Continued on page 3)



*“Mary Waiting” sculpted by Brother Joseph Aspell, SM, is in St. John the Evangelist Church, Rochester, MN.  
Joseph Aspell Studio, [jaspell@ix.netcom.net](mailto:jaspell@ix.netcom.net)*

## ***Mary as Our Pioneer in Aging*** (Continued from page 2)

### **Mary's dying**

She is like us in all things, experiencing both the limits and gradually the peaceful acceptance of the aging process, knowing that she was moving toward death. She was becoming ever more fully human and fully alive in spirit even if her body was failing.

Suppose she were completely an invalid. What might her fears and frustrations have been? To whom would she minister, and how? How would she pray? Who would care for her? How did she deal with her dependence?

Suppose a heart attack carried her away. What might her last words have been? Ask her. Listen. What do you want your last words to be? Speak them often every day.

What experience do you have that Jesus is alive? That Mary is alive? That your loved ones who have died are really alive in the risen glory of Christ and in the everlasting and dynamic presence of God? How do you feel about that? Share your feelings with Christ, your pioneer through death into life. Pray: Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us, now and at the hour of our death.

Ignatian contemplation engages our imaginations and intuitions so as to know Christ Jesus more deeply, stepping off in faith from the shorthand of the gospels into Christ Jesus, living now. Christ is not gone, sitting on some starry throne in some other galaxy. Christ is aging in us. It is no longer we who live, but Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20). We offer him this experience of slow and sometimes pain-filled diminishment so he may continue to be like us in all things.

### **From the Editor's Desk**

***Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D., Psychologist, Pittsburgh, PA***

Once Thanksgiving passes, I ready myself for one of my favorite spiritual practices. I buy a jar of almonds, take my favorite blanket out of storage, fix a steaming cup of decaffeinated English tea, and perch on the couch with each day's mail, waiting for the first Christmas card to arrive. Its senders will become my prayer partners throughout the coming year, so it's always a bit of an adventure to anticipate whom it will be.

Much to my delight, this year's first Christmas greeting came from the Sisters Adorers of the Precious Blood in London, Ontario. 2011 marks the 150th anniversary of their foundation as a contemplative community. I hope a special year

is in store for all.

My little custom may seem rather silly in light of the depth of mystery this season holds for us. Still, I like to think that the gift of the incarnation is unfolded one tiny layer at a time. It comes in a word of support, a long overdue phone call, simple courtesies, a pause to listen. It presents itself in practices that invite us to anticipate, treasure, and become the gifts that are ours.

I hope you'll take time to linger with your lives during this sacred season. Revel in the blessings that visit you in your stillness. May we all be blessing for each other. Joyous Christmas!



## Of Elders, Character, Christ's Passion, and Blessing

*By Father Ronald Rolheiser, OMI*

At a workshop several years ago, a woman shared this story: She was the mother of four children and, while they were all still young, at home, in school, her father, already a widower, suffered a stroke that left him severely debilitated. He was unable to take care of himself and needed assistance.

Being the dutiful daughter, she had him move in with her own family, at great inconvenience to her husband and children. So many of their family routines had to be adjusted and re-arranged to accommodate her dad's presence. Their life changed radically.

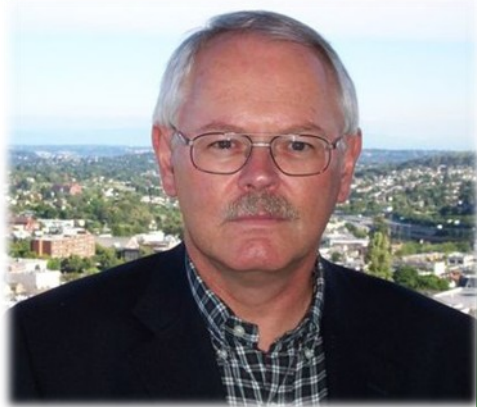
At a point, her father's condition deteriorated to the point where she had to take him to a hospice where he could receive full-time care. But, even then, she still needed to visit him daily, often having to take one or more of her children with her. This went on for seven years. Daily, she and one or other of her children would have to go and spend some time with her father.

During those years, many times, in large and small ways, she apologized to her husband and children for the inconvenience this was causing them. Eventually her father died. Several years after the funeral her eldest son, now in college, said to her: "You know, mum, all those years that we had to arrange our lives so much around Grandpa and his illness – that was really a precious time. That was a great gift to our family!"

How can the life of someone like that, someone whose life and existence can weigh on us like a burden, be a blessing? How are we gifted by having people like that in our lives?

The answer is part of a deep human and spiritual mystery, a part of the secret of love itself. We give life to each other not just in what we actively do for each other, but also, and sometimes especially, in what we passively absorb and are unable to do. Helplessness brings a special presence into a room. We give life through our activity and we also give life through our passivity. We bring a blessing to the sick when we visit them, but we also leave their presence blessed by having visited them. There is love in giving, just as there is love in receiving.

And the gift does not always look or feel like a beautifully wrapped Christmas present. The gift can, initially, seem like a burden, an unwanted imposition, an awkward inconvenience, an unfortunate duty. But those feelings themselves eventually contribute to the depth of the gift. *(Continued on page 5)*



***Used with permission of the author, Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser. Currently, Father Rolheiser is serving as President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio Texas. He can be contacted through his website, [www.ronrolheiser.com](http://www.ronrolheiser.com).***

## ***Of Elders, Character, Christ's Passion, and Blessing*** (Continued from page 4)

We see this mysterious aspect of love illustrated in the Gospels when they describe how Jesus gave his life and his death for us. Each of the Gospels has two very distinct parts: The early parts of the Gospels describe Jesus' activity and how he gave his life for us by what he did for us. The latter part of the Gospels describe Jesus' passivity and how he gave his death for us by what he passively absorbed for us. Appropriately this latter part is called The Passion (from the Latin, *passio*, meaning, passiveness.)

Today, we struggle to understand this, both intellectually and existentially. Sadly, today, we tend to define life and meaning almost solely on the basis of health, productivity, usefulness, and what we can actively contribute to others. What can we bring to the table?

And so we ask ourselves: What do the elderly who can no longer live on their own contribute to our lives? What meaning is there in the continued existence of a person living with full-blown dementia? What does someone who is mentally handicapped bring to the community? Why prolong the life of someone who is in the final stages of a terminal illness? And: Why keep a debilitated Grandpa in the house when he disrupts our normal family life?

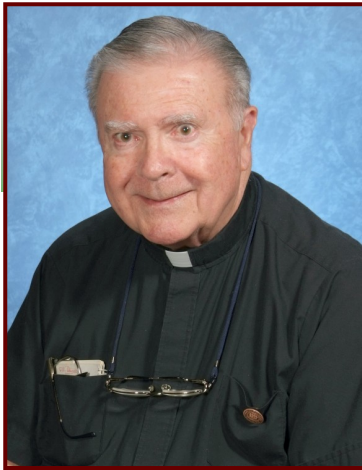


*Notre Dame de Namur Srs. Martin de Porres Coleman (left) & Joan Marie Donohoe*

The answer: Because a person in this condition, at some deep level, is giving us a precious gift, namely, depth and character.

Whenever a culture debates about the merits of euthanasia it is an infallible sign that we no longer understand this.

I like James Hillman's take on this: *Productivity is too narrow a measure of usefulness, disability too cramping a notion of helplessness. An old woman may be helpful simply as a figure valued for her character. Like a stone at the bottom of a riverbed, she may do nothing but stay still and hold her ground, but the river has to take her into account and alter its flow because of her. An older man by sheer presence plays his part as a character in the drama of the family and neighborhood. He has to be considered, and patterns adjusted simply because he is there. His character brings particular qualities to every scene, adds to their intricacy and depth by representing the past and the dead. When all the elderly are removed to retirement communities, the river flows more smoothly back home. No disruptive rocks. Less character too.*



Father Don Devine, SJ

## Being with One Whom You Love

*Father Don Devine, SJ,  
Director of Ignatian Formation,  
Fordham Preparatory School, Bronx, New York*

Getting used to writing 2011 provides an ideal occasion for reflecting upon Christian aging; the gradual transition from doing to being, from aggressive independence to grateful dependence, from active questing to reflective savoring. A gradual transition from the satisfaction of responsible stewardship to vulnerable trust and receptivity is important to each one's growth.

I once read that a time will come when it is admirable to sit under a tree and simply breathe air. It's good to stop and stare, to resign ourselves to imaginative, prayerful being and let others be active in doing for us what we can no longer do for ourselves.

When I mentioned to a fellow Jesuit that I was thinking about writing on this topic, he suggested I include Psalm 71: God, you taught me when I was young, do not desert me. Let me live to tell the rising generation of your power, you will give me life again, prolong my old age, once more comfort me. I will thank you on the lyre.

Unlike the psalmist, we live in a culture that measures our worth by what we do rather than who we are. We are tempted to do the same type of evaluating of ourselves and others. Questioning our personal value, we can forget we are still a compassionate, caring person.

We almost feel guilty when we take time to sa-

vor our experiences, to quiet our minds and rejoice that God is God, to simply stop, stare and be filled with the wonder of love, family and different generations.

Consider the excerpts from the prayer of an ailing Italian Jesuit: "Rid me of the illusion that I am indispensable. Let me still be useful, contributing my optimism to those who now take their turn at the helm. Let my lifestyle now become one of humble and serene contact with a world in change, shedding no tears for the past. Let my leaving the field of action be simple and natural, like a glowing, cheerful sunset."

Self-acceptance means liking myself now, at this age in my life. We must be rescued from a cultural obsession with youth, apologizing for my present age. I need not deny nor hide my age because I like who I am right now. True friends love us as we are, flaws and all. In God's eyes, we are lovely now. It's not our good works, achievements, or even penitence that magically renders us lovely. It is in being loved, as Chesterton says, that we become lovely.

I grew up with my maternal grandparents. When I was ten, I became aware that my grandfather would spend long periods in church. I asked him what he said during those hours and he responded, "Very little. I just enjoy being with someone whom I love and who loves me."

What better place to pause and begin a new year in gratitude for the past and in trust that the best is yet to come. *Deo gratias.*

## From the Offices of NRRO

**Brother Robert Metzger, SM**  
**Associate Director of Planning & Education**



We are celebrating the season of Advent as this issue of *Engaging Aging* is being prepared. As the Advent season reminds us, all creation is God’s wondrous gift. This was brought to mind again by a beautiful article that appeared in the Winter 2009, issue of *Engaging Aging* written by Sr. Marie Beha, OSC, entitled *A Blue-Blanket Christmas* (<http://www.usccb.org/nrro/winter2009.pdf>). Sr. Marie reminds us that God gives us many gifts during our lifetime but we are not always ready to accept them. But she also tells us, “God is patient, giving us time to grow into what is being offered.”

For me, Advent is a good time to work on patience to try to understand the many gifts God gives me in my life. I know some of these gifts take many years to understand and appreciate. It also takes time to realize these gifts from God

come in many different forms and from directions I am not always aware of. Prayer and spiritual direction are both good ways of working on this patience and understanding.

A gift that is easily seen and understood is that of the donors to NRRO. The national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious takes place each December and we are very grateful for their generosity. We ask all of our readers to join us this Christmas, and throughout the year, to remember all of our donors in prayer. Without their generosity, the work of NRRO would not be possible.

We also pray for all of you that the birth of the Christ Child will bring peace and joy to your life throughout the new year.

## A Blessed Christmas & a Peace-Filled New Year

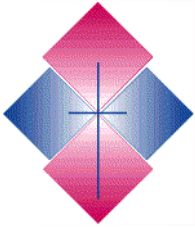
**From the Staff of the National Religious Retirement Office**

*Left to right: Sister Janice Bader, CPPS; Mrs. Jean Smith; Brother Robert Metzger, SM; Brother Henry Sammon, FMS, JCL; Mrs. Monica Glover*



### Calendar

- Jan. 2 Direct Care Assistance Applications sent out
- Jan. 21-23 Planning & Implementation Workshop; Redlands, CA
- Jan. 24 Training for new NRRO Consultants; Redlands, CA
- Feb. 9-10 NRRO Workshop: “Through Grief to New Life” Baltimore, MD
- Mar. 22 Training for new NRRO Consultants; Dayton, OH
- Apr. 5-7 Planning & Implementation Workshop; Menlo Park, CA



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*The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes this money to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs.*

*The National Religious Retirement Office supports, educates and assists religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.*

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