Teach Us to Number Our Days

The Meaning of a Long Life

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As we enter the twenty-first century, the global community is experiencing an unprecedented increase in the number and proportion of older persons. Demographic information for the United States provides one example of this shift to an aging society. In 2006, the first of more than seventy-seven million baby boomers, persons born between 1946 and 1964, turned sixty. Due to the aging of these boomers, along with increased life expectancy, the number of persons in the United States sixty-five or older will double by 2030, from nearly thirty-five million to almost seventy-two million. In less than three decades, older adults will comprise 20 percent of the population, and the oldest-old, those eighty-five and over, will have more than doubled (Tirrito, 33–59). Other countries face similar population changes as the proportion of older adults increases more rapidly than other age groups (Bengtson and others, 3–16). This longevity revolution holds wide-ranging implications not only for social and political systems worldwide, but also for the church and its ministry.

Does the lengthening of the life cycle constitute a blessing or an immense burden? What value resides in lives that no longer fit the prevailing cultural norms?

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of youthful beauty and productivity? These questions have elicited a variety of responses: concern that health care systems will be unable to handle the influx of older patients, readiness to address new markets of elderly consumers, a quest for anti-aging products designed to erase time’s traces, and increased interest in the significance of life’s middle and late years. This last consideration leads directly into spirituality.

A prayer from the book of Psalms frames the spiritual challenge for an era of unprecedented longevity: “So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart” (Ps 90:12). The Catholic tradition contains rich resources not yet fully explored for their importance to this older adult population. When more deeply mined, these traditions offer an alternate vision to a culture that often devalues the old. Reflection on this heritage will help ministers creatively shape their pastoral work with older adults. I suggest four theological themes as potentially fruitful for the contemporary conversation on the meaning of a long life.

Creation in the Image of God: Antidote to Ageism

Ageism erodes the sense that we are lovable and valuable as we grow old. Dr. Robert Butler, the first director of the National Institute on Aging, coined the term in 1969. He defined ageism as discrimination against people because they are old, a form of bigotry similar to racism and sexism (85). Like all stereotypes, this one confines itself to a single image, ignoring the diversity that is even more prevalent among older people than among other human groupings. Ageism manifests itself in demeaning language about old age, negative caricatures of older people, and arbitrary beliefs about what an older person can do. Absorbed from the wider culture, it exists in both implicit and explicit ways in church communities.

Christian teaching assures us that persons of every age are created in the image and likeness of God, are of intrinsic worth, and reveal, each uniquely, something of the mystery of God. In Catholic tradition, the imago Dei anchors the conviction that sin destroys neither creation’s goodness nor humanity’s openness to the divine. Rooted in the creation account of Genesis 1:26-28, it constitutes a fundamental symbol of human dignity, one that calls the church itself to become a community characterized by mutual reverence and respect for diversity.

Recent theological reflection addresses problematic aspects of interpreting the imago Dei and, in the process, deepens its meaning for the aging journey. In She Who Is, Elizabeth Johnson argues that, although the precise content of this symbol has shifted over time, we need not choose among these various explanations. Creation in the divine image and likeness is most fundamentally a liberating belief, intended to support the total reality and full flourishing of all persons (69–71). Johnson proposes a vision of redeemed humanity characterized by mutual respect.
and valuing. But if this inclusive community is to come about, it matters greatly how we speak about the God in whose image we are created.

The mystery of God transcends all symbols but can be named in a partial way by any aspect of reality. By keeping alive many divine images we avoid both idolatry and the devaluing of entire groups of human persons. Though Johnson is concerned primarily with recovering female images for God, her insights can be applied as well to divine names drawn from the analogy of a long life: Holy Wisdom, Grandmother God, Ancient One, or as in Africa, the One who has seen many moons. Including older persons’ experience among the multiple names for God increases a faith community’s awareness that even as we grow old, we remain like God and beloved of God.

In *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, Catherine LaCugna expands the meaning of this graced identity that all persons, old or young, may claim as creatures bearing God’s likeness. God is trinitarian. LaCugna emphasizes that being created in God’s image therefore entails a passionate life of relationship. The Spirit poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5) transforms us so that “we become by grace what God is by nature,” namely persons in full communion with God and with every creature (1). When rightly understood, trinitarian theology tells us that life’s meaning consists in a true communion of persons. This belief reorders the meaning of all human relationships. It also brings a faith perspective to the changes that the longevity revolution has produced in the composition of twenty-first-century families. Adding three decades to the average life expectancy since 1900 has created a network of intergenerational relatives as a resource for children as they grow up—great-grandparents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts. Trinitarian insights into a relational understanding of God provide a religious foundation for the creative exchange possible in multigenerational families and strengthen as well the spiritual meaning of being a grandparent or other older relative.

LaCugna also directs us to the best-known artistic portrayal of the Trinity, the icon painted by Andrei Rublev in fifteenth-century Russia (1993, 83–84). She notes that, like the greatest works of trinitarian art, it was inspired by the story in Genesis 18 of the visit of three men to the home of Abraham and Sarah. Rublev arranges the visitors in a circle, but one that is open, suggesting that we are not only invited into their communion, but are already a part of it. How instructive for our theme that the ordinary surroundings and extraordinary hospitality of this elderly biblical couple became the inspiration for so many artistic interpretati-
tions of the Trinity. In discussions of spirituality and aging, Abraham and Sarah serve as symbols of the graced fruitfulness possible in old age; trinitarian art roots their late-life generativity in an inclusive community that is an icon of the Trinity.

**The Sacramental Principle and Aging with Grace**

The sacramental principle affirms that the transcendent lies hidden in the most ordinary aspects of life, transforming them into vessels of grace. Karl Rahner comments that in such a vision of existence, in which all is sacred, “the very commonness of everyday things harbors the eternal marvel and silent mystery of God” (1967, 14). Belief in the sacramental quality of life makes aging a contemplative journey. As the arc of years reveals less time lying ahead, each hour and day become more precious. This creates ripeness for prayerful attention to God’s presence in the ordinary. In her poem, “In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being,” Denise Levertov images the divine presence as “the air enveloping the whole globe of being. / It’s we who breathe, in, out, in, the sacred” (107). Walking in the world with a contemplative attitude transfigures all aspects of the later years.

Embracing each moment, ready to receive its gifts, evokes wonder and gratitude. The laughter of a child, the first crocus of spring, the sound of rain against the window—each harbors the potential of turning solitude into contemplation and joy. Openness to the divine revealed in the details of creation gradually deepens communion with God in ways that lessen the fear beneath much of the denial of aging, the dread of one’s extinction in death. When we know from experience the divine presence in all reality, we can trust in the full communion with God that yet awaits us.

The sacraments, especially Eucharist, reconciliation, and anointing, extend the offer of God’s grace to those who grapple with aging minds and bodies: How can I become more as my physical being becomes less? Aging takes us ever more intensely into the Gospel paradox that in losing our lives we find them again in God; that loss can somehow be gain, and weakness strength; that death opens out into life (John 12:24-25; 2 Cor 4:7-18). In the sacraments we join a community defined by this mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Further, the Incarnation, God’s decision to dwell in our humanity, lies at the root of sacramental theology’s affirmation of embodiment at every stage of the life cycle. Expressed in the sacraments through bread, wine, oil, eating, anointing, and blessing, it speaks powerfully to the sacredness of the body even in its decline.

Many aging adults engage in informal or formal life review, a process that enables them both to assess the past and to find direction for the future. Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker, reflects in her journal that at fifty she clearly recognizes her own gifts and failures and does not feel disillusioned with
herself or the world. However she does not feel she yet knows the suffering and poverty of the poor: “But I have done woefully little. I am fifty, and more than half of my adult life is passed. Who knows how much time is left after fifty. Newman says the tragedy is never to have begun” (Ellsberg, 221).

Reexamining previous decades uncovers cause for gratitude and resolve for the future, but also unhealed hurts and fractured relationships. The act of remembering issues in regret and despair if past failures and sins fill the screen. On the other hand, life review becomes a graced spiritual practice when done within a larger story of redemption and a community that offers reconciliation with God, others, and the church. Two strands of the Catholic tradition prove especially helpful when incorporated into life review: trust that God is merciful and hope that everyone and everything is redeemable. The Creator of all is a gracious God, and in spite of the darkness in us and the world, there is nothing that cannot be redeemed (see Tilley, 134–44). These beliefs support the courage needed to confront life patterns that encompass not simply a particular day or deed, but many decades. In turn, the stories of older adults, when incorporated into a community’s liturgy and life, witness to these truths of faith.

**The Tradition of the Dark Night and the Losses of Aging**

How a person deals with loss is probably the key factor in successful aging. Although losses occur at many points in the life cycle, in the middle and later years they frequently arrive in clusters, and what must be relinquished is usually irreplaceable (see Hooyman and Kramer). As we age, we are likely to have experienced the loss of spouses, relatives, and friends; to have struggled with chronic illness and pain; or to have let go of a treasured career, home, and possessions. In addition, we witness with anguish the decline of loved ones for whom we are caregivers, especially if a relative or friend is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease or another form of dementia.

Many disciplines offer psychological and practical advice for dealing with these losses, but persons of faith wonder where God is in such dark times. A woman recovering from a recent stroke posed the question to me in this way: “I was so happy and doing well, and then this came like a dark curtain that never rises. Why? I wonder sometimes if God is just a thing of my imagination, something I dreamed up.”

Diverse streams of Christian spirituality address the meaning of darkness and the dark night. In the context of what he calls “everyday mysticism,” Karl Rahner describes occasions when the normal structure of life dissolves and the light that illumines daily realities goes out. During such times, he believes, we cannot escape asking if “the night surrounding us is the absurd void of death engulfing us, or
the blessed holy night which is already illumined from within and gives promise of everlasting day” (1983, 81). Rahner’s guidance for such times is especially helpful. We are to hold fast, he says, trying to love God even though the response seems to be only a divine silence and to continue loving others though we seem to receive no gratitude in return. God’s grace is found right in this darkness, even when we do not experience a felt awareness of the divine (1983, 82–84).

Mother Teresa of Calcutta followed such a spiritual path during her own dark night of the soul, and she did so while caring for the poorest of the poor. Her witness continues to inspire others who encounter such darkness, especially when they are called to be caregivers for elderly relatives and friends. The process for Mother Teresa’s beatification revealed that shortly after she began her work among the destitute and dying in the streets of India in 1947, she experienced a spiritual darkness that remained with her until her death fifty years later in 1997. In letters to her spiritual directors, she described the pain of doubt, loneliness, and loss. God seemed absent, and heaven empty; she even questioned whether God exists. Yet Mother Teresa remained faithful in all the small acts of love. She saw this struggle as her Gethsemane, her participation in the thirst Jesus knew on the cross. Determined to be “an apostle of joy,” she was sustained by a dark knowing and loving (see Zaleski).

The writings of John of the Cross also provide insight into the relationship between the dark night and contemporary experiences of impasse, such as those found in the passages of later life. As Constance FitzGerald interprets impasse (288–91), the category can be helpfully applied to the losses that sometimes accompany aging: Our normal ways of operating are halted. We realize the limits of life and its depletion. Suffering seems unavoidable and meaning evaporates. We are tempted to give up in despair. But the surprising paradox is that what appears to be so devoid of hope is in fact the wellspring of transformation. If we honestly face the limitations of our human condition, take our anger and anguish to God in prayer, and surrender to a deeper mystery, loss opens out into transfiguration.

FitzGerald reminds us that John of the Cross centers his writings on the themes of love and desire, showing how the Holy Spirit reconfigures them during the course of a lifetime. The Spirit moves us from a love that is entangled and constrained to one fulfilled in union with Jesus and others. Though we mistake the dark night as a sign of death, it is in fact an occasion for life and growth. Further,
this transformation of desire takes place within the darkness itself and often in those areas where our love and affection are strongest. When it is difficult to pray, when our usual ways of functioning or relating no longer work, it is hard to believe that we are being opened to divine grace. But the way out of impasse, FitzGerald believes, is surrender to the work of God: “It is precisely as broken, poor, and powerless that one opens oneself to the dark mystery of God in loving, peaceful waiting” (297).

Many elders have in fact testified that the dark nights of aging are just such graced passages. Letting go of roles and possessions brings greater freedom and simplicity, the struggle with illnesses such as Parkinson’s disease or cancer deepens prayer and expands compassion, and the details of caregiving provide opportunities for increased intimacy with loved ones. Meanwhile hope for a final metamorphosis in risen life sustains the movement through these transitions.

The Second Vatican Council and the Vocation of Older Adults

Just as the first baby boomers were poised to turn sixty, the Second Vatican Council celebrated its fortieth anniversary. Though the world has changed dramatically since the council ended in December 1965, many of its key themes remain more compelling than ever (see O’Collins). Its unprecedented attention to the vocation of the laity holds special importance for defining the role of elders in church and society. No age limit attaches to the universal vocation to holiness and ministry set forth by the council. The council documents deepen and direct the search for meaning in the later years, providing answers to such fundamental questions as, “What is worth doing?” “How shall I use this final gift of time?”

The council asserts that by reason of their baptism, laypeople in the church share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ. The laity are called to work for all that contributes to the common good of humanity: “Every opportunity should therefore be given them to share zealously in the salvific work of the Church according to their ability and the needs of the times” (Lumen Gentium, no. 33). Older people themselves, as well as the church and the world, will benefit from such an engaged sense of mission rooted in Christian identity. Elders include specialists in nearly every area of human endeavor and they possess finely honed talents that could be more fully available to their communities. As they scan the horizon of late life options, many desire a role in the world more spiritually substantial than filling leisure time with golf and travel, or committing to brief stints at volunteering. They want to make a difference in the world, to leave a lasting legacy.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World ignited hope when it first appeared, and it can continue to nurture that hope. The council set
itself resolutely against war, addressed problems of hunger and poverty, and recognized that humanity faces “bitter political, social, and economic hostility, and racial and ideological antagonism, nor are we free from the spectre of a war of total destruction” (Gaudium et Spes, no. 4). Elders can bring their energy and expertise to these areas, as well as others not addressed by the council but of no less pressing importance to a global community that has witnessed dramatic changes since the council ended in December 1965. Large among these concerns loom threats to the environment that endanger the Earth itself and all beings on it.

Traditional terms like retirement no longer fully describe the choices available to society’s elders now that many active decades have been added to the human life span. The church can offer its older members a mission rooted in participation in the Body of Christ and infused by hope for a social order built on truth, justice, and love. Catholicism affirms the divine presence to human life and history; action on behalf of that world calls elders to the vocation of collaborating with God in its redemption. Seen in a faith perspective, a long life constitutes a vocation to work for the justice and peace that prepare us for God’s final reign (Gaudium et Spes, no. 39).

Conclusion

The unprecedented growth of the older adult population in the United States and other parts of the world calls the church to engage in dialogue with the many disciplines now redefining aging. Older adults today are a diverse group, spanning ages from fifty to a hundred and beyond, representing many different cultures, and encompassing the healthy and active as well as the frail and ill. Drawing from its rich theological and spiritual traditions, the church can make invaluable contributions to this aging movement and, in the process, nourish both the holiness of older adults and the church’s own witness as an inclusive intergenerational community that values the gifts of all of its members.

References


