

SPIRITUALITY BEYOND EIGHTY YEARS OF AGE

A Reflection

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A COUPLE OF months ago, I attended a presentation, in a Catholic setting, entitled 'Ageing and Spirituality'. I was so frustrated. There were fifty-five minutes about ageing, based on statistics and depressing generalities, followed by five minutes of very superficial references to spirituality. I knew a little about faith development theories; I had expected to hear about recent appraisals, about specific references to Catholic traditions; I wanted to hear about applications to my life, to the life of the people sitting with me, people who sit with me in the pews every Sunday. Frustration bubbled below the surface as I returned to my daily routine.

A chance encounter with Michael Green's films led me to work he had done, (not published) about a spirituality based on the life of Mary. His thinking inspired me, even though I describe myself as a disillusioned cradle Catholic. In Michael's work I found the key to a meaningful spirituality that was missing from the talk that had so frustrated me, but Michael had not explored spirituality specifically for older people.

A Personal Search

I am not the old lady kneeling all day in church, telling her beads, mumbling 'Hail Marys', fearful of death, fearful of facing a wrathful God; worthy as that old lady is, my life has been and is different. I do not understand what resurrection and eternal life mean, but I have glimpses of possibilities; they fill me with

hope.

I am not a baby boomer nor do I share the ideas of the generations that come behind them; I am shocked at the thought of spending the 'kids' inheritance. I belong to a generation of Catholics where sacrifice was an imperative, but I remember the Latin basis of the word, 'to make sacred'. Sacrifice is not about giving up chocolate for lent; it is about, in every day terms, striving to make every aspect of my life sacred by putting legitimate interests of others before my own, about seeking God's will, not mine. When I participate in the Eucharist, through Christ, in Christ, with Christ, my life is made sacred.

I was educated before Vatican II, but by nuns and priests who were intelligent and well-informed. I was taught, before I was sixteen, that, as a Catholic, I did not have to believe in apparitions or superstitious practices. I was taught that, as a Catholic, my place was in the world, in trade unions, in the market place, and particularly in the caring professions. (Women in politics would have been a step too far.) At university, I was introduced to the possibility of a spurious religiosity in the writings of James Joyce; I encountered the extremes of Jansenism, the challenge of the '*pari de Pascal*', the activism of Max Charlesworth.

Along with the old lady telling her rosary and me, there is a host of other older people. We may have much in common, but each of us is a human being with unique individual differences, human beings who deserve respect with individual differences which need ac-

knowledge. When we seek meaning in our lives, a generic faith is not enough. Within the Catholic faith, there is a range of authentic beliefs and practices for us to draw on.

The talk with the promising title had failed me and the people around me. It had been advertised in a Catholic context, yet there was no mention of our place in the church, no mention of even the most general Catholic experiences. Statistics were used to make generalisations. Stereotypes emerged. The trouble with stereotypes is that the people may come to believe them and may live down to them; alternatively, recognising their differences, they may feel isolated. Each of us is a unique human being; each of us has our own journey.

I have always been committed to Christian ideals and involved in Catholic causes. A weakening body lacks energy and makes active commitment unreliable. Where now is my place in the Catholic community? Can I still contribute? There is a tension between using my remaining talents and letting go of activities increasingly beyond my strength. Finding the balance requires honesty and humility; patient discernment is needed to distinguish between my will and God's will. Where do I and others like me search? Who is showing us the way?

I looked up theories of development; I noted the critiques; I noted some attempts to apply them to pastoral care of older people, but the attempts were theoretical and tended to be based on stereotypes lacking authenticity. There was almost no link to the Catholic tradition. I began to reflect on my faith, to structure my thoughts in an attempt to find a link to a universal experience, but a universal experience growing out of my Catholic faith.

I believe that God created the world, that he created human beings with the awesome gift of free will, freedom to choose good or evil. Some may choose evil; some of us strive to choose goodness, but shackled by the weakness of being human and enclosed within parameters not always of our choosing, we fail to reach our ideals. However,



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God so loved the world that he sent his only son into the world that we may have life through him. (1John3:v9)

We have a way to follow, a hope of eventually attaining the ideal we strive for, a key to the kingdom.

In the words and sense of the popular song, 'I don't believe in an interventionist God'. Prayers to win the football final are obviously petty, self-indulgent and, for many people, must inevitably go unanswered. Substitute war or election for the football final; is there a difference?

... you have prayed wrongly, wanting to indulge your passions. (James 4:3)

I do believe that God is within us, that God suffers with us; therefore, we suffer with each other. God has chosen to help us through the efforts that we can make for each other. Since God has given us the gift of free will, surely then our prayer of petition must be for the strength to do his will, for the strength to use our talents to bring him to each other, for the strength to mitigate the evil that battles against God's will.

As a young woman, in the middle of the twentieth century, before Vatican II, the French writer, Andre Gide, influenced me to be open to whatever experience life offers; his examples were exciting, but amoral. Some of his contemporary writers, however, offered me a Christian context, the wonder and excitement of being open to the will of God as it unfolded before me. Hindsight may expose rationalisations and dubious or spurious responses, but the principle has guided my life.

Hindsight also shows that what may appear as a simple life has been exciting and that the future, too, as I turn eighty, may still offer exciting prospects.

It is still open to all of us, regardless of age, to accept the challenges the will of God places before us. God still relies on me, on us, to use our human talents and perhaps our professional skills to help each other, to be Christ to each other, in our homes, in the bush, in the suburbs or in the wider world scene. (Mt. 25:31-46) We must be the miracle workers until, in the words of St Paul:

In the abundance of his glory may he, through his spirit, enable you to grow firm in power with regard to inner self, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then planted in love and built on love, with all God's holy people you will have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; so that, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God. (Eph. 3:14-19)

The Fullness of God is inclusive

The fullness of God is inclusive to all people of good will, but in the Catholic tradition, we are supported through the liturgy, the work of the people, people called by God, in a particular way, to participate in the life of Christ, his life being both God's initiative and the perfect response to it. Liturgy is a means of drawing us into the fullness of God. Through accepting the word which is Christ and involving ourselves in the action in which we become Christ, we are responding to the initiative of God's power/love which enables human beings to be liberated from the selfishness/evil, which is in us and to transcend the weakness which is the human condition. To transcend, however, is not to escape.

This is indeed the mystery of Christ who, as God made man, at God's initiative, shares the human condition. He responds by living for others and dying for others, thus doing the will of the Father, and in so doing, transcends the very condition of humanity in his resur-

rection. Through Christ, we share in this mystery; that is the mystery of the liturgy and the wonder of our existence. It is also the mystery of the Church and points to its true nature. The Church exists to lead us to God; otherwise it has no purpose.

The Eucharist is the source of all liturgy. Through communion, the individuals, gathered for the Eucharist, become Christ and he becomes them. No longer individuals we are the body of Christ; we are the church; we are humanity. We are the arms and legs, the heart and head of Christ, sent out to do the work of Christ, to bring about the Kingdom and to suffer, to die and to rise in glory. The Eucharist brings us all into the fullness of God, offers the possibility of a mature faith to all of us.

However, the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine cannot be isolated from the total action. Communion services and the taking of the consecrated host to the sick must always be linked overtly to the community celebration of the Eucharist. Otherwise the essential element of communion, in contrast to community is missing.

Is participation in the Eucharist, a potential end point of faith development, an end point within the reach of all?

Theories of Faith Development have their use

Theories of development are strongly influencing attitudes to, and articles about, ageing. Theories are not facts. We accept them; we modify them; we reject them in the light of experience. People are writing about spirituality in an academic context. Mostly they are writing for 'caregivers' and, mostly, the work is based on observation, on statistics, not on experience. I listened; I read; I felt either patronised or ignored. In the effort to include all possible experiences of faith, the richness of religious faith was being displaced.

Theories of faith development gave me insights into the anger, the confusion, the sadness which had led so many of my friends away from the Catholic Church. They may have re-

jected the church, but the church had also failed them, had not reached out to show that the Eucharist was still a source of spiritual growth for all of us.

Some were told by 'card-carrying' Catholics that the church was like a club; if you broke the rules, you should be expelled. Others sadly took themselves away from the church because they were scandalised and devastated by the criminal behaviour of people unable to live up to the ideals that they had publically espoused. Some, bewildered as they came to see the goodness of people who were not Catholic, could not cope with the exclusivity that they perceived in the Church. In an age of democracy, some were scandalised by an abuse of power. In a country where the church had put so much energy and resources into education, many were bewildered when they saw informed minds silenced.

These reasons for 'leaving' the church are not difficult to understand, but, if the church is the people of God, then doesn't it include all people of good will? Who had enunciated, from the pulpit, an explanation that the challenges they face may be their struggles to leave behind the beliefs and attitudes of their childhood as they grew older and their faith matured? Who had enunciated, as often as is necessary, that the church, a divine institution, is made up of human beings with all the weaknesses of human beings, including our own weaknesses? Who had sought them out with gentleness to show the full richness of the Catholic faith?

The moving from a blind submission to external rules, the moving to an acceptance of all people of good will, the acceptance that sinfulness is the failure we all experience in striving to attain our ideals, the search for a deeper, broader understanding of a transcendent presence can all be a sign of a maturing faith not a reason for exclusion to the wilderness. The traditions of the Catholic Church provide for growth, provide for maturing, provide for diversity, but I hear only of the challenges for youth, the challenges for families,

the challenges of the contemporary church; almost as an afterthought, there is some concern for the physical needs of older people, a pat on the head, a sympathetic hand for the old lady; certainly there is comfort for the dying, but before that?

As an eighty year old, generic faith development references were not enough. I explored a process for myself and found the ideas that I needed.

Christianity, Old Age and Joy

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'...Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'you lack one thing; go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.... Mark 10: 17-22

Detachment from self-interest is a Christian ideal. Old age is sometimes described as a time of loss. We lose our professional identities; our income may decrease; relatives and friends die or move away, literally or metaphorically; homes, holding a history of a life time, are too big to maintain; gardens, formerly sources of joy become a challenge; strange words replace familiar mantras in the liturgy; arthritis stiffens the joints, restricts mobility; our bodies deteriorate; we lose our health; inevitably, we face the loss of life itself. Ageing is a process of detachment, a progress towards transcendence.

We speak of losing our independence, but were we ever independent? We are social beings. Whatever their claims, people do seek connection to something greater than themselves, an *-ism*, an *-ology*, social media. Thatcherism is not only an internal contradiction, not only the antithesis to social justice, not only a failure to recognise the essential element of humanity; it is heresy. At the end of the Eucharistic prayer, having emphasised unity, union, communion, we mutter, or we proclaim:

Through him, and with him, and in him,

O God almighty Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory and honour is yours,
forever and ever.
Amen.

Our interdependence is basic to our belief. Are we only mouthing words? As we age, we gain the opportunity to reflect that, as human beings, we have always been interdependent. Our dependence on others does not increase; it becomes more obvious. Christ reaches out to us, even more obviously, through others, and we, conscious of Christ within us, can graciously respond with gentleness, can reward the giver with gratitude and with our reciprocal support.

Loss or gain? Each time we detach ourselves from something we value, we have a reason to rejoice for are we not taking a step closer into the fullness of God? Are we not slowly making our way forward to the destiny that was always ours? Life is not downhill; we are climbing the mountain. A mature faith is in reach of all of us. Death is surely the ultimate experience of life.

Gerontologists speak of the benefit of positive attitudes in the ageing process. Theories of development speak of the threat of despair, the need to integrate life's experiences so that we reach acceptance of the life we have led. The Christian faith fulfils these needs gloriously. Why not proclaim it from the roof tops?

Can pain be included as part of this climb to the mountain? I have experienced great

sadness; I have experienced extraordinary stress; I have not experienced pain. I may come to regret the wishes that I have formally expressed about the end of my life. I want to die naturally; I want to experience life to the fullest, even if I am in pain. Remnants of the influence of Andre Gide remain. However, I do not want my life to be extended by artificial means. I believe that pain is part of the human condition, the human condition chosen metaphorically for all of us by Adam and Eve, but I do not believe that we should seek it out. Our bodies are, we believe, temples of the Holy Spirit; we carry Christ within us. Surely we have a duty to avoid pain or to minimise pain for ourselves and others. Christ did not embrace pain, but accepted it reluctantly, in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. As Christians, Christ bearers, carrying Christ to each other, professionally and personally, we should seek to minimise pain. Pain management experts talk of positive attitudes minimising the degree of pain experienced. If we came to see pain as one step, but not a necessary one, towards the fullness of God, the experience could be positive?

For Christians, surely ageing is a positive experience leading us finally to:

.....grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; so that, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God. (Ephes. 3:18-19)

I come among you as Bishop of Rome, but also as an elderly man visiting his peers. I know well the difficulties, the problems and the limits of this age [...]. Sometimes, at a certain age, one looks to the past recalling when one was young, enjoyed fresh energies, made plans for the future. So, at times, our look is clouded by sadness, considering this phase of life as the time of decline. This morning, ideally addressing all the elderly, in the awareness also of the difficulties that our age entails, I would like to say to you with profound conviction: it is beautiful to be elderly! It is necessary to discover in every age the presence and blessing of the Lord and the riches it contains. We must never let ourselves be imprisoned by sadness! We received the gift of a long life. It is lovely to live also at our age, despite some 'aches and pains' and some limitations. On our face there must always be the joy of feeling ourselves loved by God, never sadness.

—*Pope Benedict to the residents of a retirement home in Rome, Nov. 12th, 2012.*