

SPIRITUALITY AND AGEING DURING AND BEYOND

THE YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE

INTRODUCTION

In 2014 Pope Francis declared a year of Consecrated Life to commence on 30 November 2014 and to conclude on 2 February 2016. This special time in the life of consecrated persons was to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, and the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* that speaks to us of the renewal of religious life. Fifty years ago we were young, healthy, energetic, enthusiastic, dedicated women who took the reins of this document and set out to follow its guidelines. Never did we envisage the tremendous changes that the Church through the Holy Spirit was asking of us. Some things did not require much imagination. A good dressmaker fixed our external appearance. Some of us really welcomed the renunciation of the horarium that allowed us a couple of extra hours in bed on those cold winter days. But today we continue to struggle with the deeper elements of *Perfectae Caritatis*. Pope Francis in his own gentle and incisive way has reminded us of the ongoing challenge we still face.

His invitation is for us to reflect on the history of our Institute and see it from the perspective of where we are today so that we may face the future with hope. His expectations are that, in so doing, we will be people of joy, prophetic witnesses, living harmoniously in community, women who will go forth to the edges of society, and as religious will identify what God and people are asking of us today. Further he asks all members of the Church “to be increasingly aware of the ‘gift’ that is the presence of many consecrated men and women”. And finally he asks the bishops “to accept institutes of consecrated life, readily and joyfully ... to support and encourage” those who find themselves in difficult circumstances, and, above all else, to “instruct the People of God in the value of consecrated life” (Pope Francis, 2014, p.28).

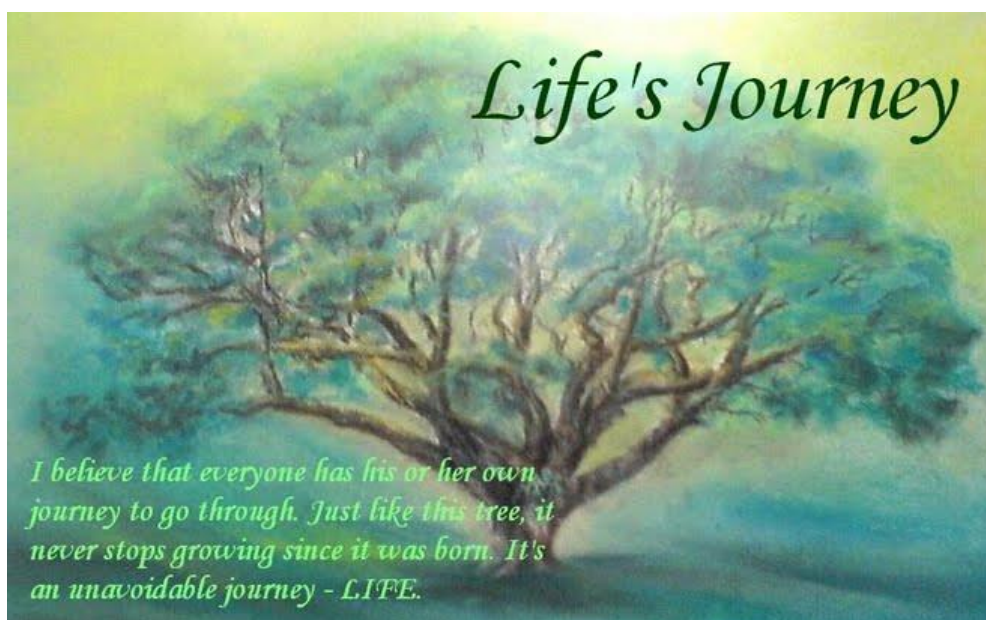
Pope Francis has addressed this Apostolic Letter to all those of consecrated life and this includes elderly religious. So, how can we respond to the expectations of Pope Francis during and beyond this year of consecrated life? In the following I will look at different aspects of the ageing process with reference to comments and questions raised about ageing in our community meeting at Lewisham in August 2015 (Appendix). Ageing, community life, ageism, loss and suffering, residential aged care, prophetic witness, reminiscence and spirituality throughout life will be briefly explored. Hopefully, this will help us to see the relevance of Pope Francis’ message for us as Sisters of Mercy, ‘heirs’ of Venerable Catherine McAuley.

AGEING

“It is a gift”

In her book *‘Noon to nightfall: A journey through midlife and ageing’* (1989), Mary d’Apice tells us, that, “although youth may be a gift of nature, age is indeed a work of art. It cannot be achieved. We have not earned it. It is a gift” (p.160). Many years ago we older religious felt God’s call to gift our lives to the Church and we responded in faith. Like all other religious we are “consecrated to God” (Pope Francis, 2014, p. 3). “We have grown within the Church and belong absolutely to the life and holiness of the Church” (Pope Francis, 2014, p. 27) directing all our efforts to the spread of God’s mission. We continue this mission whilst appreciating the gift of ageing, because “Aging is the ordinary human process that God uses to bring us to Himself” (Mathieu, 1996, p. 2).

There are no two people exactly alike. Each of us is unique. And, God has “chosen us in Christ before the world began to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Ephesians 1:4). It is through the gifts of the Spirit that we are enabled to make the choices that will help us to be ‘holy and blameless’ and become the persons God wants us to be.



The quote in the image of this tree says, “I believe everyone has his or her own journey to go through. Just like the tree it never stops growing since it was born. It’s an unavoidable journey – LIFE” (J. Mngomezulu, nd). Referring to the many different charisms of Religious Institutes, Pope Francis also speaks of the analogy of the tree with the growth of Religious Institutes. “Like the seed which becomes a tree, each Institute grew and stretched out its branches” (2014, p.5). Again, each institute has travelled its own journey. We have navigated the years and have travelled that unavoidable journey of Life, each in our own unique way. We have also been part of the Mercy Journey that has given “rise to new ways of exercising the charism, new initiatives and expressions of apostolic (mercy)” (Pope Francis, 2014, p.5).

And so, in response to the question ‘who values ageing?’ (Appendix) I believe that we must graciously accept ageing as God’s gift to us. As women of faith consecrated to God, it is essential that we acknowledge that God values us who are older religious.

Mary d'Apice has said quite simply, "it is the preciousness of our being that allures him" (1989, p. 233) for in the Book of Isaiah (43:1b-4a) we read "I have called you by your name, you are mine. ... You are precious in my sight and honoured, and I love you". Like Pope Francis, we too could look at our concept of mission, the spread of the Gospel, and respond in a way that is as unique for us now as the journey we have taken in life and learn to value our ageing selves. Once we have achieved this we will be in a position to value other older people, particularly our older Sisters, for part of our spirituality is our relationship with others.

COMMUNITY LIFE

"The mystique of living together"

As women consecrated to God, "criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy (and) hostility as ways of acting ... have no place in our houses" (Pope Francis, 2014, p.18). Rather, it is the "mystique of living together" that makes our life "a sacred pilgrimage". As Sisters of Mercy, living in community, we aspire to Catherine's legacy of union and charity, mindful that "the tender mercy of God has given us one another" (Constitutions of Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea, 2:01). We seek to enhance our relationships in ways that will lead to unconditional love. Such love is possible for Catherine tells us, "God can bend and change, form and reform any of his creatures to fit them for the purpose he designs" (Bourke, 1987, p. 68). When this happens our lives will "radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ to the full" (Pope Francis, 2014, p.15).

We try to find ways of enhancing relationships with one another. But such relationships demand from each of us recognition, respect and trust of the other. We shall do this by developing attitudes and skills that respond to a Sister's need for identity, comfort, attachment, occupation and inclusion (Kitwood, 1997) in the following ways:

Identity by

- Maintaining her self esteem
- Appreciating and preserving her life story
- Recognising and celebrating her talents and achievements

Comfort by

- Showing care and concern for her
- Lessening situations that may cause pain or anxiety
- Contributing to a relaxed environment

Attachment by

- Promoting trust in relationship with her
- Providing support in times of trouble

Occupation by

- Upholding her sense of worth
- Empowering her to use the skills and knowledge she still has

Inclusion by

- Supporting and sustaining her as she participates and contributes within a social setting
- Minimising the experience of loneliness, withdrawal, apathy and depression (Brooker & Surr, 2005, pp. 27-32).

Pope Francis tells us that, “like everyone else, we have our troubles, our dark nights of the soul, our disappointments and infirmities, our experience of slowing down as we grow older” (2014, p.14). These occasions may leave us without the ability to make a positive approach in ways suggested above. But, we should still be able to say with Catherine, “One thing is remarkable that no breach of charity ever occurred among us. I believe the sun never went down on our anger” (Sullivan, 2004, p.180). Pope Francis has offered a very rational but simple way by which this can be done. “The perfect (Religious Community) doesn’t exist. ... It’s just us sinners. ... A healthy (Religious Community) life requires frequent use of three phrases: ‘May I?’ ‘Thank you,’ and ‘I’m sorry’ (Birch, 2015, p.223).

If we continually strive to respond to these basic psychosocial needs of our Sisters in community, and remember Pope Francis’ advice, we will be actively involved in the mission of ISMAPNG (despite) the structure remaining as it is (Appendix). We will be living “in the light of the loving relationship of the three Divine Persons (c. 1 *Jn* 4:8), the model for all interpersonal relationships” (Pope Francis, 2014, p.11). We will not be moving from ‘doing’ to ‘being’ (Appendix). We will be involved in both. Our lives will be caught up in the ever-present conscious efforts that we make to bring about the presence of the Kingdom of God in our communities. We will also bring about the presence of the Kingdom of God in the wider society by our “witness of (sisterly) love, of solidarity and of sharing with others” (Pope Francis, 2014, p.16). We will be absorbed into ‘the mystique of living together’.

AGEISM

“We are beholden to no one but God”

Pope Francis’ tells us that one of the distinctive signs of a religious is that of prophecy. It is expected that we will read the signs of the times and respond in a Christlike way. We are “beholden to no one but God” (Pope Francis, 2014, p.16). So, we will seek out the needs of the poor and powerless, in this case older people. Then we will be able to respond to Pope Francis’ expectation that we go forth to the “existential peripheries of the world” (2014, p.20) - the edges of society and speak on behalf of older people towards whom much hurt is directed simply because they are old. They are forced into isolation because they are considered irrelevant. We will seek ways to counteract this form of abuse that is ageism.

Ageism is common in today’s society. It tells us that older people are useless, not needed and incompetent. It dismisses the experiences and wisdom of older people. Rather than honouring them as people of deep faith, carrying with them the beliefs, customs and practices of the society in which they live, ageism dismisses the elderly and ignores their experience and wisdom as old-fashioned. Their needs for identity, affection, occupation, comfort, inclusion and love are overlooked.

Negative attitudes will see the elderly individuals as a burden on society, a problem to be managed, an embarrassment, a group to be hidden away in institutions. For some older people the torment becomes too much. In such cases older people are influenced by these prejudices and neglect, and take on a negative view of themselves. "Ageism strikes at the very roots of a spirituality in ageing. It teaches us to fear our aging process - to deny it and to do all that we can to prevent it" (Mathieu, 1997, p. 4). It denies the sanctity of life in all life's stages. And so we find people who do not want to be referred to as 'old' or 'elderly' and don't like the term 'retirement'. We are challenged to right such attitudes. Otherwise we will be in a situation where we will "join the ranks of the prophets of doom" (Pope Francis, 2014, p.12) who believe that this final phase of life is meaningless.

The only way to counteract ageism is to refuse to allow it to taint our own lives, and acknowledge ageing as a normal process that can and ought to purify us and lead us to God. "A blessing of these years is that we are the ones whose responsibility it is to prove the stereotypes wrong, to give age its own fullness of life" (Chittister, 2008, p.25). Mary d'Apice encourages us to be positive and full of hope as we try to discover the wonders of ageing. We will come to an understanding of the sanctity of life at all stages, and in this case, the last phase. "The aged can be bringers of hope, of inspiration and new strivings" (d'Apice, 1989, p.239). An older person can make age a bright and exciting place to be, "become a Sacrament of Hope" (Mathieu, 1997, p.3), not a "dour, discontented and dissatisfied ... gloomy disciple" (Pope Francis, 2014, p.14). Pope Francis' expectation is that we will be people of joy.

The challenge for us today is to discover new initiatives that will see us continue our mission of mercy within the constraints imposed by the ageing process. We are asked to go where we will find "men and women who have lost all hope ... the elderly ... looking for a purpose in life, thirsting for the divine" (Pope Francis, 2014, p.20). We are asked to respond and find older people waiting for us to free them from these situations. Despite our own losses, we are still in a position to play a part in alleviating their hurt. "God is forever birthing forth new possibilities, and we, God's beloved, are empowered and invited to do the same. This is the primary and most enduring feature of the call to mission. We are all sent to bring new life and hope!" (Paredes, 2006, p.19). So, "By a simple word of love and affirmation, new possibilities can come to birth in others" (d'Apice, 1989, p.237). Citing the writings of Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis tells us "the apostolic effectiveness of consecrated life ... depends on the eloquence of your lives, lives which radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ to the full" (2014, p.15).

Hence, our joyful community living within retirement villages or as Sisters living in close proximity to one another and to listen to other people is a beginning. But we must go further. Our understanding of the difficulties that older people experience will guide us to speak and act with justice on issues relating to them. Ageism in all its forms should be strongly condemned.

LOSS AND SUFFERING

'Generosity and self sacrifice'

It seems easy to accept God's will when things are going well for us. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges of life, one that will require great "generosity and self sacrifice" (Pope Francis, 2014, p.9), is to accept God's will in the face of pain and suffering. The existence of suffering in a world created by a tender loving God is puzzling. Writers have found no satisfactory explanation as to why this is so. Of itself, suffering has no essential value. Mathieu suggests, "Old age gives one the precious opportunity to leisurely pray about and reflect on this great mystery of suffering and possibly integrate it in one's life" (1997, p.7). Whilst acknowledging the pain and even fear of suffering, we cannot but help link them in some way to our belief and hope in a loving God. "We may then perhaps discover that the real answer is not an explanation but a presence, that of God himself" (d'Apice, 1989, p.213). The manner in which we do this might be not so much in the '*why*' we experience suffering, as in the '*how*' we respond to suffering in our lives. Joan Chittister speaks of the suffering associated with loss asking, "Where is the will of God in loss?" She sees the response as "the catalyst for newness. ... We learn that loss is simply the invitation to begin another life ... to develop the God-life within us" (Cited by Bernadette Franks rsm, Meeting, 30 September, 2015).

As we grow older we have the potential to experience many losses that will bring with them much pain and suffering. The way in which we respond to these sufferings will be unique for each of us. But, Pope Francis tells us that in our "slowing down as we grow older ... we should be able to discover 'perfect joy'. ... to rejoice in the knowledge that we are being conformed to him who, out of love of us, did not refuse the sufferings of the cross" (Pope Francis, 2014, p.14).

Our 'slowing down' or losses can be of a physical, social, emotional, sensory and/or cognitive nature. The loss of physical function may mean relinquishing control over things better done by others. It may also mean graciously accepting from others the things we can no longer do for ourselves even the most basic forms of personal care. It may lead to someone else taking my hand, and like Peter, I will be asked to be willing to be "taken where (I) would rather not go" (John 21:18). The loss of family and friends either through death or frailty reduces our social involvement. Further, there may be times when we reflect on damaged relationships that cause us regrets. Sensory losses especially those associated with sight and hearing bring a sense of separation from the world around us, especially interaction with those with whom we mix. Cognitive losses will see a person trying to cope with memory problems, changed behavioural patterns and decreased thinking capacity.

During life, with God's help, we will have learned how we might cope with such situations. These losses could cause sadness, a feeling of hopelessness and even despair. Or it can be "an opportunity for accelerated spiritual growth in relying on the Providence of God" (Mathieu, 1997, p.3). Our spirituality will help us to move beyond concern with ourselves and seek to enrich the lives of others. It is then when we may feel we have nothing left to offer, that we will learn from Catherine that, "Though a sister's state of health may prevent her from performing any of the active duties of the house ... if she practices cordiality towards all her sisters she is doing a great deal both for God and for the community" (Purcell, 1952, p. 62).

RESIDENTIAL CARE

“He can still do great things with us”

It has been said that the sign of a civilised society is the way in which it cares for its sick and elderly members. Our Rule and Constitutions ensure that care is made available to the sick and elderly members of the Institute. But how will we cope if we are advised that we need residential care? Until such a prospect arrives, many of us have little to no knowledge of what this change means.

It is a fact that each of us values our privacy, dignity and independence, something that has been recognised and promoted within Religious Institutes more so since Vatican II. Yet at a time when we are most vulnerable we may be asked to move into an environment where such qualities are not always valued despite the best efforts of staff. In one way we are being asked to go back into an environment that has been equated with a ‘total institution’. Despite the many positive changes to residential aged care facilities in recent years, it is still communal living where residents’ privacy, freedom and self-determination may be restricted. So how can we prepare for placement in a residential aged care facility?

It is the Government that determines the cost of care and the accommodation bond. Guidelines for Government policy on residential care or care packages and how to access them are available on the web ‘My Aged Care’. Click [HERE](#) to view ‘My Aged Care’. According to availability of beds or aged care packages, it will be the decision of the Community Leader to provide us with options for care.

But this only looks after the practical details of care. Something we rarely think about is the psychological effect of this situation on the individual Sister. Just as we acknowledge that each of us has journeyed in a unique manner through life, so too we will face the prospect of residential care in a unique way. Factors that will influence our response will include our personality, health status including any neurological impairment, background history, together with the physical and social environment of the facility that is recommended. Much has been written on these topics and it would be impossible to describe the feelings an individual Sister may have should such an occasion arise. However, it may help us to understand why some Sisters will go willingly into care whilst others will have great difficulty in accepting such a decision. It will be at times such as this that our efforts to respond to their psychosocial needs will mean a great deal.

Perhaps this is one time when we can take assurance from Catherine that, wherever we find ourselves, “we have one solid comfort ... our hearts can always be in the same place centred in God (Sullivan, 2004 p. 332) because my “whole life should be a continual act of praise and prayer” (Sullivan, 2010, p. 9). We are able to do this by “embracing the future with hope. ... We can place our hope on ‘the One in whom we have put our trust’ (cf. 2 Tim 1:2), the one for whom ‘nothing is impossible’ (Lk 21:37). He can still do great things with us” (Pope Francis, 2014 p. 4). Mathieu believes that there is never a time when the possibility for growth comes to an end. “Sometimes, in God’s Providence, it is precisely during the time of one’s last hours in this life that remarkable growth takes place” (1996, p. 6).

PROPHETIC WITNESS

“Look to the past with gratitude”

When Catherine McAuley was very young, her father died. However, she inherited from him little threads of Catholicity to which she would add other strands over the years to weave her mantle of mercy. Her father's generosity to the poor and the sharing of his faith with children remained in her memory. But, soon after her father's death, other sufferings followed. Within a few years, her mother died and not long after, her brother and sister moved away from the Catholic faith to share the lifestyle of their wealthy protestant relatives with whom they were living. Catherine also moved in high society but she never forgot her faith or the poor. Details of her charitable efforts during these years are scant. However, they culminated in her selfless duties to Mr and Mrs Callaghan.

The unexpected wealth that came her way upon their death was soon used to lighten the burdens of poor women and children who were at risk in Dublin. She built the House of Mercy in Baggot Street, gathered a small group of women around her and together they began to bring hope into the lives of those who were to pass through the doors of this house.

So successful and unselfish were her achievements that people began to think such 'good works' could only be carried on by people 'consecrated to God', by Religious. Such a thought had not entered Catherine's mind but she acquiesced to the request of the Bishop to form a new Religious Institute. Humbly she undertook her Novitiate training with the Presentation Sisters at Georges Hill. Immediately after Profession she returned to Baggot Street to commence her new Foundation on 12th December 1831. As well as providing accommodation and care in her House of Mercy, she and her small group of co-workers set out walking the streets of Dublin bringing consolation to the poor and distressed. Within a few years she had founded numerous independent communities in Ireland and two in England. She travelled long, uncomfortable distances to enable Sisters to bring Mercy to those in need.

During this time it would be hard to identify any single ministry that she undertook to have Mercy take root in so many places. Some of the clergy were very good to her and understood her motives. Others were not so kind. However, she never sought to destroy the reputations of the latter. In addition to her ministry among needy women and children at Baggot Street, she trained her novices, travelled to France to discover the latest teaching methods, and accompanied her Sisters to the local hospital to comfort the sick and dying. She witnessed the deaths of her own close family members and many of her younger Sisters. Prayer was at the centre of her life. Then, just ten years after she commenced her Institute of Mercy, God called her to Himself. She was not concerned about who would take her place as Superior, telling the Sisters that the Constitutions would guide them in this decision.

But what have we really learned from her? If all we can see are her achievements, I believe we will have learned very little. She was prepared to risk all she had to commence a new form of Religious Life because that is what she believed to be the need of her time. She was prophetic. "Prophets receive from God the ability to scrutinize the time in which they live and to interpret events. ... Prophets know they are never alone. ... At times ... (they) may feel the temptation to flee, to abandon the

task of being a prophet because it is too demanding, wearisome or apparently fruitless” (Pope Francis, 2014, pp. 16-17). Catherine never abandoned her task because she firmly believed “the Order is God’s work - not mine. It will do just as well without me” (Purcell, 1927, p. 136). So, during the ten years of her Religious life she showed great courage, fidelity, generosity, humility, prayerfulness, joy, loving relationships with her Sisters, and creativity. And the list could go on and on. She had her weaknesses and we are all familiar with her remarks regarding the artistic Sister who took three days to paint the petal of a flower. But Catherine never wavered in her unfailing trust in a loving God.

We have much to ponder as we reflect on Catherine’s life. And we do this with gratitude knowing that God made her to be ‘holy and blameless’. She lived out her life in her own unique way graciously spreading God’s mercy to all she was privileged to serve.

We, too, are called to a prophetic way of life looking to the signs of the times. Old age as we know it today was not gifted to the impoverished people of Ireland at the time of Catherine. But we are not alone as we face the challenges of responding to the presence of ageing within today’s society. Hopefully we will have learned from Catherine how to continue when the task may seem ‘too demanding, wearisome or apparently fruitless’ knowing that we are involved in ‘God’s work’. We will continue our acceptance of ageing in our own lives and try graciously to spread God’s mercy to all other older people we are privileged to serve.

REMINISCENCE

“Recounting our history”

Down through the years, many Sisters of Mercy have come to Australia seeking to carry out the mission of Mercy. Most had no idea of the harsh climatic conditions and geographical isolation they would face, nor the loneliness of being separated from their families and homelands. Nevertheless, they came, all with the one desire to spread God’s Kingdom by living the Gospel. Soon there were Australian women who responded to God’s call to become Sisters of Mercy.

“Recounting our history is essential for preserving our identity, for strengthening our unity as a family and our common sense of belonging” (Pope Francis, 2014, p.5). We are reminded that this process will help us understand how earlier generations of Mercies lived out their charism, and how they used their creativity to adapt to changing times and cultures. We will also be reminded of the difficulties and suffering that came into their lives and how they used such events to change and move on in many new directions. We can take heart that human weaknesses were part of every Sister’s life and learn how each one continued her mission, relying always on the providence of a loving, tender and forgiving God. Memoirs of these women are recorded in our archives.

For those of us who were in Religious Life prior to and during Vatican II there is much we can look back on with gratitude. There are many Sisters, events, and experiences that we hold in our memories. We are part of the story of the Sisters of

Mercy and are called upon by Pope Francis to reflect on and tell our stories. Hence, we have not finished our ministry as women ‘consecrated to God’.

There are many memories still to be told. As older religious we have the sacredness of our past built around our prayer, rituals and sacramental lives and, most of all, our participation in the Eucharistic celebration. Our memories of our relationships with one another still hold many untold stories. The variety of ministries, convents, cities and country towns and the people we met along the way have all helped to shape the kinds of people we are today. It is a time when we can look back on the beauty and variety of creation and our co-creative role within it. There would have been times when we will have failed in some aspects of our spirituality. But to acknowledge our weaknesses is to acknowledge the fact that we are human. We have only to place ourselves into the arms of our almighty and merciful God.

Prior to 1963 it was generally accepted that talking about one’s past was a sign of decreasing cognitive functioning, living in the past, a denial of death, a sense of hopelessness, a negative attitude to life. However, Butler, 1963, McMahon and Rhudick, 1967, Coleman, 1986 and others have shown that looking back on life’s journey is associated with a positive adaptation to the ageing process. We reflect not only on the good times but also those that may have caused pain and suffering. Hence, this process is a way of preserving a Sister’s sense of identity and attachment as we listen to and appreciate her joyful past experiences and her achievements. For a Sister whose memories bring sadness, we also respond to her need for identity and attachment. We do this by supporting her as she reflects on troubled times. Most of all we respect her confidentiality. It can be a reminder that, for each of us, any “dark hidden failures and disappointments keep us rooted in humble acknowledgement of our dependence on God’s mercy” (d’Apice, 1989, p.236).

Within the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea, there are many rich histories of former Congregations. By listening to the stories of the Sisters we will come to understand the customs, practices and experiences that have helped to shape their lives as Sisters of Mercy. Then we can gently blend our own background with theirs. I believe this process has the potential to contribute to the unity and holiness of our Institute.

So, for us as older religious, this gift of memories helps us to engage in what Mary d’Apice refers to as the “prayer of reminiscence” (1989, p.235). Memories may bring a sense of joy and peace of mind and it may be easy to see where God has been with us along life’s way and spoken to us. We may also come to see where God has been in our lives during difficult times, mindful that we are being conformed to Him who endured his own passion and sufferings of the cross. Pope Francis encourages us to participate in this ‘prayer of reminiscence’ because, “to tell our story is to praise God and to thank him for all his gifts” (2014, p.6).

SPIRITUALITY THROUGHOUT LIFE

“Eternal peace and joy”

Pope Francis reminds us that there was only one rule for those who founded religious orders, and that was the Gospel. The vows were a concrete way for members of

Religious Institutes to live Gospel values authentically. The charism or gift of each religious institute was the vision by which each of the founders sought to respond to the needs of their time. Today we are called to reflect on the charism of our foundress and respond in new and creative ways whilst living the Gospel.

We are able to do this because at Baptism the gifts of the Holy Spirit - wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord were bestowed upon us and these were sealed and strengthened at Confirmation. Over the years these gifts will have helped us to respond to the workings of God in our lives. Gradually, despite our weaknesses, our attitudes and behaviours will be marked by joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). Then, with these gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, we will continue our unique journey of life. We will reflect on the charism of mercy and, as older Religious, quietly and creatively, respond to needs in ways inspired by Gospel values.

Further, we shall have come to recognise the “Source of all Being” (d’Apice, 2000) when we delve into and appreciate the all-embracing concept of eco spirituality. Through this we will come to an understanding of the universe and our interdependence within it. When, in the later years of life, we have moved beyond active ministry, contemplation of all that is about us will continue to bring with it, in the words of Thomas Berry, ‘a sense of awe and amazement’. Reflecting on the writings of St Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis says, “the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise” (2015, p. 18).

Thus, despite our failings, we will have learned to recognise the unfolding of the God-life within and our co-creative role in the world that lies about us. Even in moments of adversity such as ‘daily setbacks especially those involving rejection ... confrontation with personal weakness ... the aging process itself’ (McGowan, 1996, p.6) we can experience God in our lives.

Any loneliness that we may feel in later life, “when touched by God’s presence, becomes a place of solitude” (d’Apice, 1989, p. 239) described by Joan Chittister as “the new monastery of the elderly” (2008, p.144). It is then, “in the stillness of contemplative prayer, we learn to listen to the God who speaks to us through everything that is” (Merton, cited in D’Apice, 2000, p.4). Like Mary, our Mother of Mercy, we will be able “to treasure all these things in (our) heart(s)” (Luke 2:51).

One of the many ways Mary d’Apice suggests will help us to age joyfully is to “befriend death. ... to think often of dying, aware that it will be the doorway to eternal peace and joy” (2000, p.3). However, “eternal life that God has for us is not simply a better version of this one. ... In front of us is the start of a new time of joy and endless light” (Pope Francis, 2013). We will experience “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived” (Corinthians 2:8).

Then, when death does come, the words of Catherine’s Suscipe that we have prayed over the years, let my delight be “the hope of coming to the possession of Thee, my God, in Thine own everlasting Kingdom” (Sullivan, 2012, p.216) will be fulfilled. This will be so because “the journey ends with our personal face-to-face encounter with our God” (Mathieu, 1996, p.6) when each of us will hear

*“The voice grown dear in silent listening years:
‘Woman of (merciful) heart, here is your home’.”*
(Consedine, 2001, p.40).

Bibliography

D’Apice, M. (January, 2000). A time of promise: Spirituality & Ageing. In *Inform* 67.

D’Apice, M. (1989). *Noon to nightfall: A journey through midlife and ageing*. Collins Dove: Melbourne.

Birch, D. (Ed.). (2015). *The wisdom of Pope Francis*. Skyhorse Publishing: New York.

Brooker, D. & Surr, C. (2005) *Dementia Care Mapping: Principles & practice* University of Bradford: UK.

Butler, R.N. (1963). The life review: an interpretation of reminiscence in the aged. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and biological processes*, 26, (1), 65.

Chittister, J. (2008). *The gift of years: Growing older gracefully*. Blue Bridge: New York.

Coleman, P.G. (1986). *Ageing and reminiscence processes – Social and clinical implications*. John Wiley & Sons: Chichester.

Consedine, R. (2001). *Songs of the journey*. Presentation Sisters: Melbourne.

Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea. (2013). *Constitutions*.

Kitwood, T. (1997). *Dementia reconsidered. The person comes first*. Open University Press: Buckingham.

McGowan, K. (1996). Seek first the kingdom. *Compassion Number 47 pp 1-7*. Retrieved March 20, 2009, from <http://www.cptyon.org/compassion/win96/seek1st.html>

McMahon, A.W. & Rhudick, P.J. (1967). Reminiscing in the aged: An adaptive response. In Levin & Kahana (Eds.). *Psychodynamic studies on aging: Creativity, reminiscing, and dying*. Croom Helm: New York.

Mathieu, A. (1996). Toward a spirituality of aging. *Compassion Number 47* pp 1-8. Retrieved March 20, 2009, from <http://www.cptyon.org/compassion/win96/spiry.html>

Paredes, J. (2006). Mission, the key to understanding Consecrated Life today. *UISG Bulletin, 131*, p.19.

Pope Francis (2013-11-10). *Death is behind us, in front of us God of the living*. Retrieved November 9, 2015 from vietcatholic.net.

Pope Francis (2014). *Letter to all consecrated people: Apostolic letter on the occasion of the year of consecrated life*. Catholic Truth Society: London.

Pope Francis (2015). *Laudato Si': On care for our common home*. St Pauls Publications: Strathfield.

Purcell, M. (1952). *Retreat Instructions of Mother Mary Catherine McAuley*. Sisters of Mercy, Albany, New York (eds). The Newman Press: Westminster, Maryland.

Purcell, M. (1927). *Familiar instructions of Rev Mother McAuley*. Vincentian Press: St Louis Missouri.

Sullivan, M. (2012). *The path of mercy: the life of Catherine McAuley*. Catholic University of America Press: Washington, D.C.

Sullivan, M. (2010). *The practical sayings of Catherine McAuley*. The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas: New York.

Sullivan, M. (2004). *The correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841*. Four Courts Press: The Catholic University Press of America.

Prepared by Margaret Randall RSM - November 26, 2015.

APPENDIX

Community Meeting Central B Sydney Lewisham August 30th 2015

Q As we reflect on where we find ourselves now in ministry, what has changed since the 1980-s

WHAT HAS CHANGED?

Ageing
From full time to part time
Moving from active ministry
Ministries less structured
From “ministry appointment” to other ways of being called
Great need to be self motivated
A more reflective approach now
Wisdom that emerges with ageing
From “doing” to “being”
More levels of listening

WHAT QUESTIONS DOES THIS RAISE

Who values ageing? It can mean a sense of loss
Do we need processes that move us from ‘doing’ to “being”?
How do I blend personal & spiritual?
How do I “be mercy” for the group? Is it recognised?
How do we minister in our diminishing circumstances - where and how?
What is coming at us “multiculturalism” etc in Mission & ministry?
What are we doing communally to focus mission and ministry?
How do we communally discern how we speak of mission?
How do we differentiate Ministry & mission?
How can I actively be involved in the mission of ISMAPNG if the structure remains as it is?

AREAS FOR ACTION

Ageing - formation from doing to being

Developing a focus about ministry - so we can communally respond
How do we assist sisters who feel fragmented in their ministry _ *a little bit of this, a little bit of that. Sense our experience finds an alienation from Institute view of ministry - chosen few*
Where is our practical service to the poor
Agenda for Mission that is part of our life - Mission of God within the Institute – being - each trying to live authentically - linked to whole