AGEING AND PRAYING

By FINBARR LYNCH

AS I SIT HERE AT MY WINDOW to begin this article, I can see a number of ash trees in their February bareness. They are tall, well-developed, mature. What strikes me is the beauty there is in this bareness. Now devoid of leaves, their underlying structure is disclosed. Their branches are clearly seen; some rise up, some stretch out, others trail down. This is a winter beauty. These trees have grown side by side and have adapted to each other as they reached towards light. Now without the leaves of last summer and autumn, that inner structure which supported the fruitfulness and summer beauty is more evident and yields a different enjoyment to the beholder. What summer hid is now revealed. There is a poverty here, but a beauty too.

Something similar is true of ageing. As we grow beyond middle-age, our inner structure becomes apparent. Life is simplified; essentials come into clearer focus; the upward reach towards the light is clearer; much stripping has happened; what we have become is easier to see. This is very striking when one comes across an instance, as I have, of someone who, as a result of a stroke, is suddenly and unexpectedly deprived of speech and the ability to read, and all the accustomed echoes of self-worth, and yet can accept this enormous change. They are available for a joy and a sense of God's presence that is now coming through. Here the inner structure of unselfish focus and of freedom to let go is manifest; the stripping has revealed a profound openness towards God.

I find it impossible to write about ageing and praying by describing typical cases, for the variety is so great. But underlying the prayer relationship there are typical issues which are faced by the ageing, issues intrinsic to their relationship with God. They express these issues in their prayer. So I propose first to illustrate the styles, and then to treat of some of the issues.

Diversity of styles

There is so much variation of style. A woman in her eighties whom I know uses the prayers that others have composed – the Morning and Evening Prayer of the Divine Office, the rosary, aspirations – and does not know the personal praying of active response to the mysteries of the Gospel. Her prayer is personal and full of devotion, but in the words of others. The language is not her own, but the relationship it carries is very much hers, a unique connectedness with God. Because that relationship has become central to her life, her praying is frequent.

On the other hand, I remember a priest friend in his eighties saying to me on several occasions, 'I have more time now and you would think that with having more time I would be praying more, but that is not how it goes'. The message may be that for prayer to be frequent in the maturer years it needs to have put down roots in the earlier ones. Personal prayer becomes simpler, but not easier, for it always involves the effort to move beyond ourselves.

I met a 75-year-old woman some time ago who was longing for a greater presence of prayer in her day. What seemed to open the door for her was a realization, during a parish week of guided personal prayer, that God is not an accountant keeping a tally on all that went wrong in her earlier years, but rather a God whose focus is how ready and able she now is, as a result of those experiences, to receive love and give love. For God is seeking openness where he may enter, and all the earlier choices we made contribute either to the openness or the narrowness we have now; it is the resulting shape of our heart that God is concerned about. With this discovery, she is now happy to let herself be aware of God's accepting nearness, and prayer is a dimension of her daily life.

I know of some who find more in a weekday mass than on a Sunday, for they experience there a certain atmosphere, a sense of belonging. These same people would not formally meditate on the Gospels, but their reflection happens incidentally, as when they might remark, 'I love that story about the two who were walking to Emmaus'. They would not call this 'prayer', but prayer it is, for it colours their faith-stance towards life.

Those who have been introduced to prayer with bible texts, either through the experience of a parish week of guided personal prayer or through belonging to a prayer group, have discovered a rich treasury of prayer-material through which to grow in their sense of God and sense of self. They embark on a new journey of personal intimacy with God which brings them into trackless places and uncharted waters. For to be loved is to be led into mystery. It is a time when spiritual direction becomes highly desirable and such a help. They need accompaniment so as to read from other markers, those of the Spirit acting within, and trust that the movement into mystery is leading them into God. Prayer with the scriptural word helps them to perceive God speaking also through the unwritten word of their own experiences: *Word* interacts with word, making prayer real. For these people, life and prayer are becoming integrated and indistinguishable; life is becoming a religious experience; God is being found in every situation.

Some older people tell me that prayer now finds its place more easily in their day. Where formerly, in mid-life, it was prayer that yielded to

the pressure from new attractions, noise, radio and TV, now time is found for it; the other things have lost their strong appeal. Prayer always entails a measure of self-transcendence; it is not simply a matter of slipping into it, but of stepping into it; so finding time for prayer is the result of choosing to find time for it.

Others would say, 'Prayer is simpler now; it is more like being than doing; and is more Another's than my own; I am the place which it happens whenever I choose to stop and sit and let myself be'.

Another would say that prayer is a recurring wonder at the incarnation itself: that God should have chosen to become a human being! Where earlier it was the baby that attracted, now it is in the larger mystery that our humanity has become a meeting-place with the divine One. To be human is to be close to God; to grow in humanness is to grow in holiness; God is within.

For those in their sixties who have grown in personal prayer, prayer is no longer a compartment; it is a dimension, a climate, an atmosphere, a gift of awareness. Some have grown into a trinitarian space, as it were, and experience their prayer as a participation in Christ's prayer. The fact that it is a participation is true of all Christian prayer, but to experience it as such is a gift and a growth.

Life and religious experience

> As life affects us, God affects us, and as we react to life we react to God. The reaction may be generally positive: . . . Or it may be negative: . . . Or we may be happy about some things in our lives and irked, depressed, or hurt by others. Some of these reactions run much deeper than the person's conscious thought, and motivate him more vitally. Any dialogue with the Lord that involves more than the surface of the person's life must take these deeper reactions into account, for they will influence prayer whether he wants them to or not.[1]

What Barry and Connolly are saying here widens the concept of prayer: praying and living are inextricably linked. This is humbling and also inviting for each of us, because everything is included here. I cannot get away from God. With Jacob I can exclaim, 'Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it' (Gen 28:16). The invitation is to awaken and grow more aware lest I miss the meaning of what is going on in my life, not realizing who it is I am in dialogue with all the time. For people who are ageing this is more urgent because time is running out. 'God is in the facts,' someone has said. The question is, 'Can I pick up God's message? Can I hear? Do I want to co-operate?'

What Barry and Connolly assert is put in another way by Janice Edwards:

> Life and religious experience are the same event, yet this perception would surprise many people. God is intricately involved in all of life, regardless of people's awareness of God's presence. Some people only realize this over a period of time with guidance and/or repeated experiences of God's involvement in life events. Gradually, they realize that life and religious experience are not two separate realities, but one tightly woven fabric.[2]

It follows that any reflection on prayer in the later years of life must take account of the issues of maturity faced in those decades, for one's responses to the invitations and challenges of life are ultimately responses to God. Life becomes religious experience when I recognize that God is meeting me in this event, personally communicating with me, inviting a forward response from me. This spiritual awareness then is prayer; prayer as lived, prayer as life-stance, prayer as relationship. People who are sick in hospital will tell you that they cannot pray or find it hard to do so; but it seems to me that the prayer appropriate to a very sick person is that they say 'yes' – or desire to say 'yes' – to the way things are for them just now, thus aligning their self to God's will as experienced in the felt helplessness.

I remember a confrère I lived with for many years who had had a massive stroke in his mid-thirties and was to live the second half of his life under the great limitation of not being able to speak much or be useful as a priest. His prayer seemed to me to be a 'yes' to his limitations and to a providence which, to us who lived with him, was so mysterious. He could do no better than live in faith a 'yes' to how things were for him; he could do nothing greater than this. To fill the limitation with willingness was full achievement and grace, and a fruitfulness hidden from his eyes.

Self-worth and meaning

Watching my handicapped confrère I often asked myself, 'What is life about? What is success? Why are we here?' And I knew that the answer, whatever it was, must include my friend. We who lived with him learned to see that the real basis of a person's worth lies beyond accomplishments, even beyond good works. Beneath this man's apparent uselessness lay the mystery of his inestimable worth in God's eyes.

> Ultimately it is God's love that grounds human dignity and the mature sense of self-worth. God does not love me because I am good;

> rather, I am able to be good because God loves me. And God's love is unconditioned. It is both unmerited and unmeritable. It does not *depend* on what I do or who I am; it constitutes these.[3]

To value myself as and because God values me is surely a profound union with God – even a state of prayer.

The call to find my worth at this deep level is particularly relevant in mature age.

> The Christian affirmation of personal worth is relevant to more than the aged, but its power is tested in a particular way in one's old age. To affirm God's love as a source of my worth when my life is going well, when there are several other sources of positive evaluation to which I can turn, is itself a movement of grace. It is indeed a deeper challenge to affirm the primacy of this love when the other sources in my life become unsure.[4]

This issue of one's personal worth becomes acute in mature age as important sources of self-esteem are diminished or fall away, such sources as productivity, influence, social position, beauty, physical vigour. These have helped me to know and accept myself, but now I must go deeper, for I am more than what I do, I am more than what people accept me for. Prayer can bring me in touch with the foundation of my worth: I am a son or daughter of God. In the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius, the meditation on Two Standards is designed to alert me to the temptation to identify myself with my possessions, achievements and reputation, all that is fragile and can be taken from me; but no one can take from me the fundamental treasure, namely, who I am in God's eyes. Prayer helps me to find this treasure. Prayer leads me to look beyond God's gifts to God's self and to God's regard for me, and so too does the experience of growing old, for the gifts are falling away and I am being stripped to my essentials like the trees in autumn.

Reconciliation

Part of the movement towards acceptance of basic worth is the business of becoming reconciled with my past. My past, with its mixture of pain and joy, of failure and success, of selfishness and love, is composed of everything that has brought me to this point now. Issues for forgiveness arise in prayer because my relationships with self and others are intrinsic to my relationship with God. Issues for reconciliation arise in prayer for I am vulnerable in prayer to any resistances to reality. Can I forgive myself for the shape I have put on my life? Can I

accept that my growth was necessarily a zigzag course as I strayed to the left and the right and endeavoured to keep moving forward? Can I accept the parents I had, necessarily limited, without wishing they were different, and move more fully into acceptance of the fact that my life is my own responsibility? Can I accept my own particularity and the circumstances which have shaped me? Can I say 'yes' to God's world, which is in all respects limited, imperfect and in process? This reconciliation is a deep prayer stance, and its fruit is a growing appreciation, beyond mere acceptance, of all those persons – parents and others – who have influenced my life. Our wounds, when owned, become places where God meets us, and they even become our instruments of grace for others. St Paul was led to exclaim, 'When I am weak, then I am strong', for the Lord had taught him, 'My grace is all you need; power is most fully seen in weakness . . .' (2 Cor 12:10, 9). Wounds can be glorious if they are first cleansed and then healed.

Memories surface from the past throughout life, asking to be faced and felt and integrated, and mature age is no exception. The love and affirmation experienced in prayer opens our defences and lets the pain of the past come through to be seen and understood from a new viewpoint and to be accepted; what we ran from originally can now be befriended because of the assurance of God's love for who we are. A 'yes' to one's past becomes a 'yes' to one's present, and leads one closer to a contemplative stance of living in the present moment, able to receive the awareness of God's presence, and to appreciate life as it is.

To accept one's present is to move into gratitude. I know someone in her eighties who says she gives thanks to God many times each day that she has the use of her five senses, can bend down and pick up a pin, can do small jobs around the house, is able to read and is interested in her family and the daily news; she welcomes each new day, receiving it as a gracious gift.

The reconciliation with one's past is not a return to a former balance from which one has fallen during a time of crisis or distress. That non-developmental model of reconciliation speaks of a return from sin to a former lost state of purity, and comes from seeing the issues as being sinfulness versus a fixed ideal of perfection. Such a model is no help and, moreover, is out of tune with the *felix culpa*, the 'happy fault' celebrated in the Easter Vigil liturgy. A more developmental understanding of reconciliation allows us to integrate all of the past into our growth in humanness:

> [In mid-life] I become reconciled with my past, acknowledging personal limitations and sinfulness in a way not possible before . . . It

> is a reconciliation within myself, and of myself with God . . . This interior reconciliation (with myself and with God) must often be accompanied by reconciliation with loved ones – spouse, parents, children, friends.[5]

I notice that there is a further gift in the recovery of memories of the past: one sees there the hand of God. We all have many experiences but we often 'miss the meaning', as T. S. Eliot put it, for we do not pause to read their message. Jesus asks us at every eucharist to celebrate a memory, that of his death and resurrection – 'in remembrance of me' (Lk 22:19) – for we need to keep reminding ourselves how much he loves us. Thus at mass the power of the past is brought into the present for us. So also with our personal memories: they have power for us when we recognize how God was loving us in what happened. With practice we become skilled to read God's message more immediately; and we become more grateful and trusting.

Surrender

Where relationships are growing, there is a sharing of control. Prayer, being a relationship, also requires a sharing of control – with God. Indeed, the deepest place in prayer is where God has been allowed to take over fully, and the prayer is experienced as Another's, taking place within one's being. God draws the person who has surrendered into the experience of mutuality in love; it is a place of reverence, awe and love.

Life moves in the same direction, if one will co-operate with it. 'A central movement of human maturity is the repeating dynamic of accepting and then relinquishing, of caring and letting go.'[6] 'Letting go is central to personal maturity; it is at the heart of Christian spirituality as well.'[7] In middle age one is releasing one's children and one's work to the dynamism of their own development. In mature age one is invited to let go of illusions and masks that may have served one well in youth; one has to let go of many of the fragile advantages that have contributed to one's sense of worth. The real diminishments of ageing, its deprivations and losses, are opportunities to divest oneself of illusions and false securities and to take on a deeper spiritual awareness of what is essential. One is despoiled; Another is in control. To see these as opportunities is an enormous challenge; one needs the eye of faith, which is exercised in personal prayer. To see God's loving hand shaping me for himself in these circumstances is a gift of grace. To consent to having one's life taken out of one's control is no easy thing. In old age one is like Peter to whom the Lord said,

> 'When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out

> yours hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' (Jn 21:18)

A case in point is Father Pedro Arrupe, former General Superior of the Society of Jesus, who suffered a stroke and was then unable to speak except a little in his own Basque; before his stroke he had been able to speak sixteen languages. In a message conveyed through his general assistants he said in September 1983:

> More than ever, I now find myself in the hands of God. This is what I have wanted all my life, from my youth. And this still the one thing I want. But now there is a difference: the initiative is entirely with God. It is indeed a profound spiritual experience to know and feel myself so totally in his hands.[8]

Affirm or deny?

> – Night is drawing nigh –
> For all that has been – Thanks!
> To all that shall be – Yes![9]

At some point in life one begins to think of one's age as time-left-to-live more than as time-since-birth; one realizes that there are more yesterdays than tomorrows. This shift in time perspective adds urgency to the task of finding meaning for one's life. The past cannot be changed; the future is not open to all possibilities: 'Night is drawing nigh'. A tension arises between our impulses to affirm meaning and to despair of meaning. What is true success? What is my scale of measurement? What is my life, anybody's life, all about? Inability to find my own life acceptable leads to despair.

> Despair, like integrity, is a response to the particularity of my own life. It arises in an inability to find my own life acceptable. It can surface as discontent with the present or as complaint over the shape of the past. These dissatisfactions become despair when accompanied by the realization that there is not enough time left. Death will come too soon to permit me one last chance to make something different – something meaningful – of my life.[10]

Each one of us experiences whiffs of despair in response to our awareness of the limits of our own life and the fact that it is coming to an end soon. Not all the possibilities of my life have been realized. I experience remorse and regret and guilt in the face of what I have done

and what I have failed to do. A struggle arises in each one's heart, to a greater or lesser degree, whether to affirm or deny life, to accept or rail at limitation, to call my existence significant or absurd. Prayer, because it is relationship with Someone who transcends my senses, is a major help to my transcending the urge to despair. It affirms that death is not the absurd ending of all, an ending which Philip Larkin, in his poem 'Aubade', calls

> . . . the total emptiness for ever,
> The sure extinction that we travel to
> And shall be lost in always.[11]

> Erikson counts the fear of death as one of the faces of despair in old age. This fear is less of annihilation than it is of absurdity. Death comes too soon – it will seal the emptiness of my life before I can make sense of it, before I can complete some last desperate attempt to give it meaning . . . For the sting of death is not the loss of life but the loss of meaning.[12]

The eucharistic remembering of the death-unto-resurrection of Christ is a regular invitation to the praying Christian to affirm life in the face of experiences of diminishment, and to place one's hope of ultimate success on the gracious mercy of God: '"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise".' (Lk 23:42–43). Jesus' inglorious death helps one to see and accept that love and relationship, not measurable results, are the ultimate success.

Some people refuse the invitation to mature into self-transcendence, and this failure can result in self-absorption. They hold on to self instead of giving it away; they insulate themselves from life and draw back from social involvement; they dodge the opportunities for growth, for they are terrified of change. Adult life thus becomes religiously stagnant. This could be described as a condition of being trapped in oneself. It is hard to see how such a person could experience the personal prayer I have in mind in this article. The person appears to be sealed off, but I believe that God, in the end, can prise us open to himself and draw us to where our deepest self longs to be.

Wisdom

It is reassuring to note that the majority of persons grow old gracefully. Some such are striking in the wisdom they attain of an

inclusive understanding, a widened empathy, a broadened appreciation of diversity and pluralism. The wise older person is thus more in tune with God, whose compassion is boundless (Lk 6:36). They realize that their life is bounded by death, that all life is bounded by death, and yet that it is life, not death, that prevails. Such recognition of death liberates concern for life, and it enables one to live in the present moment, contributing what one can with a detachment that allows others to be free. They can say with honesty:

> For all that has been – Thanks!
> To all that shall be – Yes![9]

Conclusion

Living and praying are inextricably linked. The issues to be faced on the journey of personal maturing and ageing, some of which have been touched upon here, are the same that one faces in the growth and maturing of prayer. For I can only pray personally out of who I am and how I am. How one responds to the invitations and challenges of life is ultimately how one is responding to God; and the initiative is always God's. Our dialogue with our existence is our dialogue with God. The more one is awakened to this, the more one's living and ageing become religious experience, for life and religious experience are the same event. So, ageing becomes praying the more I recognize that God is meeting me in each happening, each moment. It is as if mere living is prayer that is not yet conscious – for God is picking up my signals, always attentive to me. But when living becomes awakened to God's continuous involvement, then two awarenesses meet, mine and God's, and the adventure begins and continues, and living and ageing become praying, and my situation becomes, in Jacob's words, 'the house of God . . . the gateway to heaven' (Gen 28:17).

NOTES

[1] William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The practice of spiritual direction* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), p 68.
[2] Janice Edwards, *Studies in Formative Spirituality* vol VII, no 2 (May 1986), p 177.
[3] Evelyn E. Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *Christian life patterns* (New York: Image Books, 1982), p 206.
[4] *Ibid.*, p 206.
[5] *Ibid.*, pp 166, 167.
[6] *Ibid.*, p 209.
[7] *Ibid.*, p 210.
[8] *Documents of the 33rd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1984), p 93.

[9] Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, translated by W. H. Auden and Leif Sjöberg (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p 87.
[10] Whitehead, *op. cit.*, p 188.
[11] Philip Larkin, *Collected poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p 208.
[12] Whitehead, *op. cit.*, p 194.