

# THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND A SPIRITUALITY FOR THE LATER YEARS

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A FEW MONTHS AGO, I RECEIVED MY MEDICARE card in the mail, an acknowledgment of my sixty-fifth birthday. It is one of those secular life transitions that raise spiritual questions as well. Officially achieving the status of a senior citizen implies, at least in theory, a shift from mid-life questions to questions of old age. Some sociologists name us the 'young-old' as opposed to the 'middle-old' or the 'old-old'. Whatever title best describes us, the transition is an invitation to reflect on the challenges and graces that await us in later years.

In middle and later life we are challenged to face many inevitable realities. These realities gradually invade our consciousness, and, as we grow older, they become more and more central to our experience. But although there are significant differences between mid-life and our later years, there are also questions and concerns that remain constant throughout the second half of our lives. My purpose here is not to summarise or criticize the many excellent writings by developmental psychologists on mid-life and the stages of growth beyond mid-life. Nor can I do justice to the flood of writings and reflections on mid-life spirituality and spirituality for the wisdom years. My more modest goal is to sketch very briefly some of the realities on which I have begun to reflect, and the realities that others have shared with me in their own journeys through their later years. Then I will describe some elements of a spirituality for this time of life, and relate those elements to the graces of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.

## ***The Realities of the Later Years***

The first reality to be faced in later life is the simple fact that there is more past than future. In mid-life and after we acknowledge that we have more yesterdays than tomorrows. Though we spend a great deal of time talking about the past, there is also a growing awareness of the

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limited number of years we have left. Each day becomes more of a gift to be cherished than a given to be presumed.

Our later years also invite us to be at peace about the roads not taken. At the beginning of mid-life, people may choose to change commitments or careers, and set out on new roads that seem more life-giving and authentic. This can happen even much later in life, but as we grow older it is no longer possible to take many of these roads. As the young struggle to choose from too many possibilities, older people have fewer opportunities, fewer choices that are realistic.

The later years are a time to acknowledge decisions made in the past—decisions that we cannot change, and that have set a direction for our lives. Many of them may well have been wise and loving, but some decisions we may now regret, and carry as a burden. They may have harmed others, or excluded possibilities for growth in our lives. We would choose differently now, but the choices we have made cannot be erased or denied. We must come to peace with these decisions, seek forgiveness when possible, and surrender them to God.

As we grow older, we also become more aware that certain things will be left undone. We must let go of many of the dreams we had in adolescence and early adulthood, and accept that there are many things we will not do in our lives. The future has boundaries that set limits on our goals and hopes.

Ageing brings the experience of physical limitation. There is a keen awareness of diminishment, and a growing sense of mortality. More and more time is spent at doctors' appointments. The inevitability of death is harder to escape. The deaths of parents and even siblings lead our thoughts to our own death. We become more in touch with the things we cannot control, the basic existential realities of our birth and life and death. The call to surrender to God's plan becomes more persistent.

The second half of life is often described as the journey within, as a time to search for our true selves and inner worth and values more than for the external achievements that motivate the first half of life. In the early adult and middle years we can be intensely involved in activity, in taking charge and making things happen. As we grow older, we may find ourselves stopping to reflect, and discovering a greater concern with wisdom than with generativity. Being at peace with ourselves takes on more importance. We become more focused on who

we are and on who we are becoming than on what we are accomplishing or what we will accomplish.

At first glance, the above description may seem sobering, if not bleak. But, in the light of faith, old age emerges as a rich time of life, a time of growth in interiority and inner resourcefulness, a time to harvest the gifts of our past life and to foster a new and deeper relationship with God.

### ***A Spirituality for the Later Years***

We can name seven features of a spirituality for our later years that will invite us and challenge us to live our relationship with God more fully—features that can be nourished by the graces and movements of the Spiritual Exercises.

#### *Gratitude*

First, a spirituality of our later years will be a spirituality of gratitude. Gratitude remains the foundation and source of our spiritual lives. The second half of life is an especially good time to grow in awareness of the gift of life itself, of health, friends, vocation and ministry. It is a time to remember and savour all the other gifts we have received—gifts that have sustained us on the road we have taken in life. As we look back on our lives, we recognise the many times when we have taken things for granted, and claimed things as our own that were clearly gifts. Our lack of gratitude may have led us to lose touch with the Giver of all gifts. Our later years are a time to acknowledge and cherish the gifts that have been given to us, and the wonders that God has worked in and through us during our lives. It is a great temptation to devalue what we have done in life, to compare our achievements with those of others whom we admire or with the great dreams of our youth. We begin to ask questions. What difference have I made? What have I done of lasting value? How have I responded to the graces given to me? We may fail to celebrate and treasure the everyday but extraordinary moments of friendship, ministry and prayer. The second half of life calls us to true humility, and to the recognition of our gifts as gifts from the hands of a loving God.

***To grow in awareness of the gift of life itself***

This sense of gratitude is a grace elicited by Ignatius' Principle and Foundation: the consideration of our creaturehood, and of the purpose

of our lives. Ignatius reminds us that we are created out of love, and sustained in existence in love; everything in our lives is a gift from a gracious and generous God. The Principle and Foundation of our spiritual lives is the freeing experience of knowing that we are loved unconditionally by God.

### *Forgiveness*

A second characteristic of a spirituality of later life is the grace of forgiveness. This is a time for letting go of life's hurts, a time to forgive others, especially those significant people in our lives who have formed and shaped us. In the first part of life, the temptation often occurs to scapegoat parents, or teachers, or religious superiors, or spouses, or friends: 'if only they had loved me better, or understood me better, or given me the opportunity to ...'. We trace our lack of success or our psychological wounds to the failures of others, to their insensitivity or lack of appreciation of us. We recognise their human imperfection and its impact on our lives. Naming the sources of our hurts in this way is a necessary and potentially healing exercise. We have to come to terms with our superego, and uncover the conscious and unconscious roots of our anger and pain. As we grow older, however, we must move towards forgiveness, towards letting go and accepting responsibility for our lives at the present moment. This means letting go of grudges and resentments that drag us back into the past and sap our enthusiasm for the present and future. Forgiveness and letting go free us from the endless repetition of past stories of injustice and hurt that we tell as if they were the events of yesterday.

We pray for the grace to experience and accept God's forgiveness of our own brokenness and infidelity. We pray that this grace of forgiveness will transform our hearts into forgiving hearts that can share our experience of forgiveness with others. But perhaps the greatest and most difficult challenge of later life is to forgive ourselves. We are called upon to forgive our own failings and mistakes and sins, and to love ourselves as God loves us. Forgiving ourselves means letting go of our regrets, accepting our limitations, and coming to peace with the decisions and actions that we can no longer change. Forgiving ourselves is the final fruit of accepting God's forgiveness, and the only path to peace.

Ignatius, in the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises, invites us to pray for the grace of knowing that we are loved sinners. We pray to see

ourselves through God's eyes, and to experience true sorrow for our sins, as well as the unfailing mercy of God. In later life, the grace of this First Week, or of any such moment, becomes more and more focused on the forgiveness of others and of ourselves.

*Fidelity and Recommitment*

The later years are a time to say 'yes' again, but now with the wisdom and realism of years of life experience. Knowing what we now know about the joys and struggles of our lived commitments, we re-embrace them. We decide anew to be faithful. In mid-life, this experience has been named the 'second call', a reaffirmation of the first call with a deepened awareness of what it means. And for some, of course, mid-life becomes a time to re-examine and perhaps change the commitments or directions of their lives, to begin anew in response to what is perceived as a new call. But in the later years, our recommitment takes the form of the graced acceptance of the choices that we have made and lived, and of a desire to persevere to the end. It does not exclude the searching questions: 'If I knew then what I know now, would I have made different choices? Would I now choose this same way again?' Whatever our answers to these questions, the later years demand that we acknowledge decisions made in the past, and make peace with them. The 'yes' of youth, the 'yes' of mid-life and the 'yes' of the later years are dramatized in the 'yeses' of the wedding day or the first vows, the twenty-fifth anniversary and the fiftieth anniversary. Each 'yes' is equally valid, and has a distinctive meaning that demands different resources and offers different rewards.

**A time to  
say 'yes'  
again**

The wisdom of the later years leads to the humble recognition that, in the end, we will be saved by God's fidelity, not by our own. We know from experience that, left to our own resources, we will too often be unfaithful, or less than total in our self-giving. The freedom that we experience in our later years comes from a deepened awareness of God's faithfulness, of God's never ending willingness to begin again no matter how often we fail, or compromise, or lose sight of our goal, or simply do not respond to grace. Our God is a God of patience who awaits our response, but also a God who is persistent in searching us out.

The later years are the time to respond again to the question of Jesus: 'Who do you say that I am?' In youth, Jesus may appeal to us as



Francis Borja, *by Diego Velázquez*

the leader of a great adventure, the one who inspires us to dream great dreams and explore exciting possibilities. We hope never to lose that inspiration, but in later life Jesus may take on new roles for us. We may think of him as the revealer, who assures us of who God is for us. We may think of him as the redeemer, who assures us that God saves us from our own brokenness and limitations, but who also challenges us to reach out to others in need of help and consolation. Finally, we may simply encounter Jesus as an old friend, who walks with us, supports us, and empowers us to carry on his ministry. We must each find out who Jesus is for us at this time in our lives, and who Jesus desires to be for us.

The later years are a time to revisit the story of Martha and Mary, and to recognise that Jesus calls us to be friends, not simply ministers. We claim the value of our ministry to be the service and care of others; yet we hear the call to be more like Mary, as a friend at the feet of Jesus, and less like Martha, as a servant compulsively at work in the kitchen. In our younger days, we identified with the parable of the servant who works all day in the fields and returns to prepare the Master's dinner. Now we may identify more with the parable of the

servant who returns at the end of the day to discover that the Master invites him to sit down and be served. If our earlier days called us to find God in extraordinary, if not heroic, acts of service, now we are inclined to find God in the everyday joys and struggles of our lives. The challenge now is to redeem the ordinary, and to acknowledge that God is found in the acts of each day that shape and define our lives and touch in simple ways the lives of others.

In relation to the Spiritual Exercises, the Election or life choice made earlier in life (a choice made in the Second Week of the Exercises) must be reaffirmed or deepened in the later years. The Election is no longer the discernment of a fundamental vocation, or of the direction in which God is calling us in life. The Second Week of the Exercises now becomes an invitation to embrace the life choice that we have already made with a matured sense of realism, with a 'yes' tempered by past successes and failures and by a new awareness that God is the one who takes the initiative while we respond, at times reluctantly, at times generously. The dream born in youth and purified in mid-life is now, in the later years, confirmed. It is less like Ignatius' experiences at Loyola and Manresa and more like his later experience at La Storta, when God confirmed that Ignatius had been on the right path for all the years that he had laboured with Jesus, carrying his cross.

The grace that is prayed for throughout the Second Week is the grace to know Jesus more intimately, to love him more ardently and to follow him more closely. The later years give us the opportunity of a more mature friendship with Jesus, rooted in a more intimate knowledge and a more seasoned love. The growing knowledge and love of Jesus lay the foundation for continued and faithful service. We may be less stirred by the dramatic Call of the King, and more at home with the daily ministry of Jesus as he touches a few individuals who are in need of healing and consolation. The Second Week of the Exercises addresses us more as a long-time disciple than as a new recruit.

### *Hospitality*

The temptation of the later years is to settle down, to define our world by the limited horizons that have become the boundaries of our lives. We become comfortable, and we expect little that is new. We lack the vision and the energy to explore new ways of doing things. We are content where we are, and we would prefer to live out our lives in the

ways to which we have become accustomed. The challenge at this time of life is to expand the landscape of our hearts, to find new perspectives, and to dare to redefine our world. We pray for the grace to resist the hardening of our categories of thought, to remain open to thinking and dreaming in new ways, and to include in our view of the world what we have previously ignored. The later years take on new life when we dare to step across the boundaries of what we know, and to discover new people and experiences and ministries that we were afraid to encounter in the past.

Hospitality is about welcoming the stranger, and about making a space for those who are without a home. It is about creating a place where people can feel accepted as they are, and not feel judged by standards other than their own. It is about not demanding that others conform to our own conventions and judgments. It is what makes the alien into a friend. And this is true not only of unfamiliar people, but also of new ideas and new ways of doing things.

The Second Week of the Exercises invites us to contemplate the ministry of Jesus, a ministry of inclusion that refused to be restricted by the limited world of laws and social structures. Jesus met and welcomed the 'unclean', those on the edges of society who were excluded by arbitrary social taboos. He ate with sinners and people ignorant of the Law. He touched lepers and Gentiles, which made him unclean too, according to the Law. To know and love Jesus is to know and love someone who challenged all the structures of his society. The Second Week of the Exercises is thus a call, not only to share in Jesus' ministry in the traditional and conventional ways, but to be prophetic and innovative. If our later years call us to remain open to new worlds, and to new ways of approaching them, Jesus offers us a model of someone who refused to be defined by structures and expectations that stood in the way of creative ministry.

#### *Limits and Surrender*

The later years are a time to let go of illusions, of unrealistic expectations about ourselves and others. There is a temptation, of course, to become disillusioned, to lose heart and become cynical. Was it all just an adolescent dream that came to nothing? They are also a time to empty ourselves and surrender to the work of God within us.

In a new sense, we accept the things that we cannot change, and the things that we will not be able to do in our lives. We come to terms



with the dreams that will never be realised and the mid-life resolutions that will never be carried out. We continue to find God in our successes, but we also discover that we often experience God even more profoundly and authentically in our failures. We can look back over our lives and acknowledge that the presence of God has been more tangible and believable in the places where we have struggled or failed, where we have had to face our limitations and inadequacies, than where we have succeeded. We have learned from experience that success is finally in God's hands and not in our own. We have embraced the truth of the psalm: 'Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain' (Psalm 127:1). Our experience has called us to a new and more radical dependence on God and trust in God's promises. We have known Peter's experience of fishing all night and catching nothing, but we have also known the surprising and gratuitous gift of a boat full of fish when we have allowed Jesus to direct the casting of our nets.

**Success is in  
God's hands,  
not in our own**

The temptation at this time in life is to become discouraged at our lack of progress and at our meagre efforts to respond to the opportunities of grace. We may have a paralyzing sense of the impossibility of living the ideal or achieving the dream, but we also have the humble awareness that God continues to do great things in us and through us. We have walked boldly on the water, but we know the terrifying experience of beginning to sink. And ultimately we know that such lapses are an invitation—an invitation to trust in faith that Jesus is there to hold us up.

The Third Week of the Exercises invites us into the suffering and death of Jesus. We are to experience the cost of discipleship by sharing in the passion of Jesus, his rejection and the seeming failure of his mission. The passion takes on a new meaning in our later lives as we struggle with our own failures, and with the limited scope of our ministry. Yes, there is much that we will leave undone. We can identify in a new way with Jesus' experience of his death. We can glory in our weakness; we can accept our own experience of being an earthenware vessel; we can answer the call to take up our cross and die each day so that others might live. Only in our later years do these rich biblical ideas take on their fullest significance in our lives.

*Hope*

Hope is a central virtue in the later years, not simply because of the awareness that death is growing more imminent and that we are called to hope in God's promises of eternal life. We also need to continue hoping in what God can do in and through us in the years we have left. There is a temptation passively to accept that what we have is all there is. We may settle down and resign ourselves to our present level of competence or sanctity. We may have little hope that God can do more for us, or that we can respond to God in any new or more generous way. We may become content, though disappointed, that we have reached a plateau in our relationship with God, and in our ability to learn radically new things or to take surprising new directions in our lives.

***The grace  
of believing  
that God can  
do new things  
in us and  
through us***

The grace at this time is to believe that God can do new things in us and through us. Significant changes are still possible in prayer and ministry. This grace manifests itself in our openness to new ministries later in life—not just in the sense of finding other activities to do after years in one ministry, but in the sense of seeing a new way to serve that captures our hearts and imaginations. The world is full of stories of people discovering new careers and new activities in society, and new ministries in the Church, as they pass from middle into later life. These are people who search out further education or discover new ways of sharing their gifts with others. They are people of hope who embrace new possibilities, who refuse to restrict their options to things already tried. Hope does not allow people in their later years to think only in terms of what God has already done in their lives. Hope opens us to the unexpected and unimagined.

I am reminded of the sage advice of an elderly African-American, whose wisdom came not from books but from life. He shared his experience of God with someone much younger, a spiritual director anxious to know more about the ways of the Spirit. The older man reflected: 'God be slow. God be slow. God be very slow, but God always gets done on time'. The later years are years of hope, because we believe that God is not finished yet, but that God will get done on time, and that what God plans to do is beyond our most optimistic expectations.

*Joy*

‘Grumpy old men and women’, ‘cynical and negative curmudgeons’—these descriptions are usually reserved for those well on in years who see only the dark side of life, but they can also apply to the ‘young-old’ who have lost a sense of hope and joy. An enlivening grace of the later years is the sense of rejoicing in what God has done and in what God continues to do within us. This grace calls forth not only gratitude for the gifts of a lifetime, but also a deeper sense of God’s continuing presence and faithful love. Joy expands our hearts and sends us forth to share the good news. Joy is contagious and leads others to discover God in their own experience. A joyful person in later years is a wonderful witness to faith in God’s graciousness and goodness.

The Fourth Week of the Exercises focuses our prayer and reflection on the resurrection of Jesus and on his resurrection appearances. We pray for the grace to rejoice with Jesus who has been raised and suffers no more. As we contemplate the resurrection appearances, we know the gift of peace that the risen Christ offers to his disciples, and we experience Jesus’ ministry of consolation to those who are discouraged and confused. The resurrection of Jesus is the source and foundation of our hope, the assurance that God can truly make all things new, that even death is a way to new life. In our later years, the graces of the Fourth Week of the Exercises take on a richer meaning. The Fourth Week inspires hope in our own resurrection, but even more it now invites us to identify with the risen Christ and his ministry of consolation. The wisdom that comes from many years of sharing in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus’ dying and rising becomes a grace to share with others. The gospel stories describe how the disciples who encountered the risen Christ were empowered with a new sense of mission to carry on Jesus’ ministry. The risen Christ was their model for a ministry of forgiveness and consolation, and of new beginnings.

But the prayerful encounter with Christ risen also assures us of the lasting value of our life’s work. Jesus was raised as a whole person, not as a disembodied spirit. He retained his humanity, and thus affirmed the eternal significance of whatever has been an expression of human love. His resurrection witnesses to the fact that whatever we have done in prayer, in creativity and in service will last forever. As we look back on our lives, and ahead into the future, what greater reason can

we find for joy than Jesus' promise that the fruit of our lives will not simply disappear but will be a permanent part of the reign of God?

### ***Growing in Grace***

Though Ignatius Loyola envisaged the Exercises as an experience to be had only once, the Exercises nevertheless articulate the whole pattern of our spiritual lives and of the ongoing journey of our growth into holiness. They continue to evoke within us the invitations of God to grow into a deeper relationship with God in the various stages of our lives. I suggest that the experience of the Exercises is quite different for someone starting on the road of discipleship, and for someone well travelled on that road. As we grow into our later years, the Exercises take on a new meaning and significance, and they invite us to a spirituality appropriate to this stage of our lives. The Exercises call everyone to gratitude, forgiveness, commitment, hospitality, surrender, hope and joy, but for the Christian in their later years each one of these graces has developed a distinct character and texture. We pray the final 'Take, Lord, receive' of the Exercises in quite different ways at twenty-five, thirty-five, forty-five, fifty-five, sixty-five and seventy-five. When we say these words later in life, it is not necessarily better or more profound, but it does reflect a specific and changing relationship with God.

I conclude with a prayer I composed shortly after turning sixty. Now, five years later, it seems even more true to our stance before God in our later years:

Lord, I am growing old.

I do not want to be old before my time. I do not want to be an early retiree or to fail to give all my energy to your service in my remaining years, but I cannot deny the decades gone and the limited years ahead. I feel more fragile, more vulnerable.

In my youth, there were so many days, months, yes years that seemed to lie ahead that I fooled myself with illusions of immortality. Now I know the years are numbered, and I sense in a new way that each day is a gift not to be presumed but to be cherished.

My relationship with you has always sustained me, directed me, and given me hope, but too often I have neglected it, presumed it was there, and failed to nourish it. Even my commitment to

ministry seemed too often a product of compulsion rather than zeal, of a desire to be esteemed rather than a desire to serve.

But this is less a time for regrets and self-criticisms and more a time for gratitude and renewed commitments.

This is a time to deepen my relationship with you and to be more attentive to your presence in my everyday life.

This is a time to be with you, Lord, and to invite you to be with me.

This is a time to surrender my life into your hands and to discover that my name is written on the palm of your hand.

This is a time to tend to my deepest desires so that I can discover your desires for me.

This is a time to think about home and where my heart is and to unearth my treasure.

This is a time for abiding in you and noticing how you abide in me.

This is a time for harvesting and a time for planting new seeds in the sure hope that you will give them growth.

Jesus, you said to Peter: 'When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go' (John 21:18). Lord, be with me as I grow old. Lead me, guide me and draw me ever closer to your heart for only there will I find peace and the assurance of life eternal. Amen.

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