

# SPIRITUALITY IN ADULTHOOD

## Development and Fruition

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**M**OST OF US BELIEVE TWO SAYINGS about the evening of our lives that seem to be at odds. We might often say, 'there's no fool like an old fool', but we also know that 'age brings wisdom'. We know that the best wisdom often comes from those who have a seasoned perspective and a breadth of experience. Every traditional society reverences the wisdom of the elders, and it is only recently in our modern technological culture that this truth has been, sadly, disregarded.

One striking example of mature wisdom comes to mind. In my first pastoral assignment I noticed an elderly woman named Mabel who came to daily Mass. She was unassuming and softly spoken. But there was something about her. She seemed to radiate holiness. Later I discovered that Mabel was the volunteer librarian at our parish school. And I also learnt that when children were acting up in class, their teachers didn't always send them to the principal's office. More often they were sent to the library, just to hang out with Mabel.

She didn't try to be their therapist and she certainly wasn't their disciplinarian. She just let them hang out. And almost always they would tell her what was going on in their lives. After a while, when they were ready, she would suggest they go back to class. When they did they were different. A gentle healing power resided with Mabel. What I saw was a woman who was enjoying the fruits of a lifetime lived in the love of Jesus Christ. Recently I was telling the story of Mabel at Mass, and a woman told me that she had known Mabel throughout their adulthood. I wasn't surprised to find out that her whole life had been one of gentle, loving care.

Sometimes, however, the saying, 'there's no fool like an old fool', is all too accurate. People who throughout their adulthood were afraid to open their spirits to inner growth, who were attached to status or control or self-indulgence, often live in the evening of their lives in an

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even more impoverished way than they did in their prime. Their lack of self-awareness, their resistance to growth, haunts them even more in their old age.

**What we sow, we reap** 'Age brings wisdom' but 'there's no fool like an old fool': both are true for the same reason. As another saying has it: '*what we sow, we reap*'. In the evening of our lives we can either reap a harvest of virtue, prayer, love and generosity, or else lead a trivial existence which becomes ever more ridiculous. Carl Jung described those who did not renounce superficial *personae* in the latter years of their lives, and who did not engage the deeper dynamics of their souls, as 'hypochondriacs, niggards, doctrinaires, applauders of the past, or eternal adolescents'.<sup>1</sup> This article investigates what is cultivated along the way to old age. I give special attention to the elderly because they can, like Mabel, illustrate the fruition of a good life, a fully human and fully spiritual life. But it is also critically important to understand how such people became wise, loving and life-giving elders.

### **Erik Erikson and the Life Cycle**

One helpful way to understand this cultivation of either virtue or folly is to look at Erik Erikson's famous outline of the life cycle. Erikson believed that inner development had to be aligned to critical eras in life. The soul or self, he argued, is intertwined with our physical, social, biological and cognitive growth. Collectively, these form a kind of acculturation from which no one is exempt. Each stage of the life cycle is marked by a specific challenge, and handling each challenge skilfully gives a person a particular strength. Further, each of these strengths becomes the foundation for the successful negotiation of new challenges. If the challenge of a particular stage is not well negotiated, subsequent stages will be more difficult.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, every time a new life-challenge presents itself, it is necessary, according to Erikson, to go through a revision of all the previous challenges. We deal again, at a more sophisticated level, with the same issues that were dealt with before. Such revisiting of past challenges, while

<sup>1</sup> As cited in Patrick Carroll and Katherine Dyckman, *Chaos or Creation: Spirituality at Mid-Life* (New York: Paulist, 1986), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Life Cycle Completed* (New York: Norton, 1982), 70.

seemingly arduous, gives us an opportunity to reconstitute and redevelop strengths that were poorly formed as a result of how we faced a previous challenge.<sup>3</sup>

Some have criticized Erikson for linking psychological, biological and social maturation so closely, since human development (for example the development of the ego, or moral development) is not at all age-specific.<sup>4</sup> But Erikson argued that life itself forces the issues of growth on each person. When we are of school age, we necessarily have to deal with questions of socialisation and achievement in a way we did not or could not as young children.<sup>5</sup>

For the newborn, the first psychological issue at hand is to ascertain, albeit unconsciously, whether or not the world can be trusted. This trustworthiness is established by the degree to which a child's needs are met. The strength that Erikson attributed to this stage is a sense of *hope*. Specific later hopes need this primitive and essential seed to have been planted well. Gradually, the toddler exercises a new control over life. If the child is allowed appropriate self-direction, then they incorporate the strength of *will*. 'Will', said Erikson, 'is the unbroken determination to exercise free choice as well as self-restraint ...'.<sup>6</sup>

Erikson described the young child's challenge as that of initiative as against guilt, that is the ability freely to express oneself rather than to be paralyzed by a sense of shame or inadequacy. Play becomes an important activity here, since it confronts children with the need for cooperation, for mutual support, and even for planning as to how games might be played. It brings the child a sense of *purpose*. At school age, children can take their own specific initiatives. Erikson noted that in all cultures this is the period of life where durable achievements first occur. The emerging strength that corresponds to this stage is a sense of *competence*.

<sup>3</sup> Erikson, *Life Cycle Completed*, 29; Erik H. Erikson, Joan M. Erikson and Helen Q. Kivnick, *Vital Involvement in Old Age* (New York: Norton, 1964), 138.

<sup>4</sup> See Jane Loevinger, *Ego Development: Conceptions and Theories* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976), 174.

<sup>5</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), 19. Erikson details the stages of development in several of his writings. The following is a synthesis of those descriptions which can be found in *Life Cycle Completed*, 63-79; *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: Norton, 1964), 115-133; and *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 91-141.

<sup>6</sup> Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility*, 119.

Erikson believed that adolescence is the time to come to terms with one's identity. It is a liminal time, a kind of moratorium in our lives, during which we seek out and identify who we want to be in the world. The strength arising out of the challenge of identity is that of *fidelity*, that is, of being true to oneself. The adolescent has the foundation for adult virtues, but has not yet acquired them.

The next developmental stage is for the young adult to make life-directing choices. Only this type of self-determined commitment allows us to enter into true intimacy with another person. If we have really developed a sense of identity, then we now become free to love and to commit ourselves. This intimacy that Erikson described is the strength of *love*.

Middle age presents a new challenge in human development, that is, of becoming generative. How can we make sure that what we have produced and fostered will continue? Middle age, Erikson argued, needs a kind of self-verification, the assurance that our commitments and sense of purpose are worthwhile, and that they are going to be carried on. Failure to become generative leads to stagnation. The strength that Erikson relates to this stage is a sense of *care*.

In old age, Erikson believed that we return to the place where we started, to a *childlikeness*. The task of this stage is not to regress to *childishness*, with its concomitant narcissism, but to a childlike state in which one can delight in the world. The final stage of life brings with it concern and love in the face of death itself. Erikson called the strength arising from completing this task *wisdom*. The wisdom that an elderly person gains comes from embracing life in the midst of facing death. Erikson described this challenge as discovering integrity in contrast to despair. Those who have found integrity are largely tolerant of the world; they are understanding, open-minded and compassionate. Sometimes this state represents a new way of being compared to one's earlier years.

### **What This Looks Like Religiously**

People often quote the famous saying of St Irenaeus of Lyon: 'The glory of God is the human being fully alive, and the life of the person is the

vision of God'.<sup>7</sup> In Jesus Christ, God has given human life and dignity a radically high status by literally incorporating human nature into the divine life. Thus, a fully human life glorifies God. It follows that a Christian spirituality can and must learn from developmental psychology. But the Christian knows that our lives, to be truly human, must also be wholly spiritual. This points us to the second part of Irenaeus' statement: 'and the life of the person is the vision of God'. For Christians, holiness cannot simply be collapsed into psychological concepts of individuation or self-acceptance. Christian spirituality ultimately points to union with God, and to the paschal mystery.

Paul's letter to the Philippians expresses something of this mystery. Either in his own words or by borrowing an older text, Paul encourages us to take on the posture of Jesus:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

We see the pattern: for the sake of serving God and the world, Christ emptied himself of all he might cling to. Paradoxically, this brought him to glorification. Jesus himself frequently put the same paradox before us: 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 10:39). Obviously Jesus is not using the term 'life' in the same way in both parts of the teaching; he is evoking a paradox. Thomas Merton frequently spoke of our *false self* and our *true self*, the latter ultimately being an identity indistinguishable from the mystery of God and dwelling within it.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Against Heresies*, 4.20.7. The text is, *Gloria enim Dei vivens homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei*. Literally it would translate, 'The glory of God is a live human being, and a truly human life is the vision of God'. Most, however translate it as I have, particularly in light of the fact that Irenaeus is arguing here against a gnostic dualism that challenges living a fully integrated human life.

<sup>8</sup> See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Direction Books, 1961), especially 7, 31-33, 47. For an interesting study on Merton's sense of self see Anne Carr, *A Search for*

The trick is that this dying or emptying should not neglect the first part of Irenaeus' dictum, 'The glory of God is the human being fully alive'. Dying to oneself is not equivalent to renouncing authentic human needs. That would be to set psychological health in opposition to spiritual maturity. Joann Wolski Conn wisely comments:

To cut ourselves off from the maturing process, to shirk personal growth under the cover of the cliché *God alone*, is in fact to escape from God because God is not glorified in half-persons.<sup>9</sup>

How can we bring together the paradoxes of Christian spiritual growth with the human challenges outlined by Erikson? I would like to suggest that we can use three traditional spiritual terms: the *purgative way*, the *illuminative way* and the *unitive way*.<sup>10</sup> While these terms are normally used to describe a linear progression in the contemplative life, and mysticism on a high level, I believe they can also describe the progression of Christian faith in terms of a 'style' of being faithful. They represent forms or postures of being spiritual throughout the life cycle.

### ***Early Adulthood and the Purgative Way***

We saw that early adulthood is the chance to consolidate the identity one develops in adolescence. One strikes out, takes charge of one's life, and defines oneself by one's commitments and relationships. Religiously, it is still a time of learning what it means to be an adult with spiritual integrity. Young adults test out their resources and their ideals for generous service. These are the people in the Church who, in the midst of intense family duties, can often be counted on to do energetic, short-term parish projects.<sup>11</sup>

I suggest that this is also a classic time for the purgative way. Classically, the purgative way has been described as the ascetical path. This need not include donning hair shirts and the like, for life itself

*Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of Self* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> Joann Wolski Conn, *Spirituality and Personal Maturity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 8.

<sup>10</sup> We also see this approach in a somewhat different form in Benedict Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns: The Psychological Challenges and Religious Invitations of Adulthood* (New York: Crossroad, 1979), 139.

demands a great deal of purging from our adolescent self-absorption. Parents have children, whose many needs constantly force them to be generous and self-sacrificing. And spouses challenge us to love them not only when they are attractive to us, but also, and all the more, when they are not.

Morally, the purgative way calls us to follow Christ more zealously in every dimension of our lives. One cannot separate one's religious life from one's engagement in the world. And as we grow, we necessarily come to recognise and confront destructive and disordered parts of ourselves that in adolescence were rationalised or even denied.

Early adulthood can also be a time of religious zeal, as Christians embrace their religious identity seriously. Religious zeal can occur in adolescence or adulthood, but whenever it occurs, it can all too easily take on the tone of fundamentalism, or even of self-righteousness. St John of the Cross suggests that early zeal can never avoid some level of this.<sup>12</sup> So the challenge of adulthood is to distinguish between a true heart for Jesus and religious judgmentalism, impatience, anger, and so on. Distinguishing between true and false piety is an intrinsic part of the purgative way.

**Early adulthood  
is a time of  
religious zeal**

Early adulthood is marked by this responsibility of making concrete our identities; it also involves our learning more about our faith. The young adult is still a learner, and prayer is often experienced as a kind of learning. We read and meditate on the scriptures. God is truly present, but often experienced indirectly through what spiritually inspires us or gives us insight. The great limitation of this stage is that one's faith tends to be intellectual, energized by what is exterior to the self.

The idea of the purgative way enriches Erikson's vision of strengths arising out of conflicts. It enables us to see the transitions as expressions of a paschal life, as a kind of dying to oneself leading to something new. Teilhard de Chardin describes this dynamic, particularly as it relates to young adulthood, as a radical detachment in the midst of action, a divinising of our activities, recreating our life-world and aligning it more fully to the Kingdom of God. The challenge

<sup>12</sup> See *Dark Night*, 1.2.7.

is to live only for God, but in the context of embracing life fully.<sup>13</sup> Teilhard writes:

Each reality attained and left behind gives us access to the discovery and pursuit of an ideal of higher spiritual content.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Mid-Life and the Illuminative Way***

In the middle years many move to a greater sense of stewardship and mature leadership, particularly in their faith communities. This corresponds with Erikson's idea of generativity. In the family, leadership and generativity are usually expressed in parenting. In a religious community, it may be expressed as care for the whole church. Those in mid-life have often been involved in parish life for years on different levels. These years of commitment often give them a true sense of what is important. The task now is to be a steward of these central values and of their concrete expressions in church life.

The mid-life crisis takes on many forms, but it usually revolves around confronting one's youthful idealism and reassessing one's values and satisfactions. This reassessment is not only typical; it is necessary. It allows one to come to greater interiority, to a greater understanding of one's inner landscape. Jung saw the move to interiority in mid-life as absolutely necessary.<sup>15</sup> While many young adults have a difficult time being alone, people in mid-life often find that solitude and introspection are exactly what they need.

Typically, one's prayer life should follow this desire for interiority. Instead of wanting to know *about* God, the second half of life is about knowing God personally, that is, coming to some intimacy with God. Reading the Bible should move from emphasis on learning *about* the Lord and the gospel to experiencing God's actual presence in the Word. The Bible no longer functions merely as an instruction book, but becomes also a sacrament of encounter with the living God. And this deeper intimacy with God leads to

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 56-62.

<sup>14</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, 72.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Wolff-Salin, *No Other Light: Points of Convergence in Psychology and Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 21.



more authentic care for others. Mid-life can either be very self-absorbed, or it can be an opportunity to love with an interior depth that one simply did not have as a young adult. People become more aligned with the Spirit in their lives.

There are some parallels between the illuminative way and the life-tasks of middle age. The barriers to freedom have fallen and the most powerful defences have been relinquished; the fruits of the purgative way are ripe. But now the virtues also become more *infused*. They become less something we strive to extend, and more a natural extension of an emerging spiritual self. Generosity increases now, not because one *ought* to do this or that good thing or because one needs to perpetuate a self-identity as a *good Christian*. Rather, one is generous because this represents the very self one is becoming in grace. This parallels what Erikson says about the emerging strength of care. One cares and is generative simply because acting like this represents one's truest self. Prayer, too, changes. In early adulthood, prayer was principally an inner dialogue with the self and a measuring of oneself against the teachings of the gospel. Now prayer becomes more of a being with Christ, characterized by substance rather than words. One's sense of identity enters into a greater mystery. Clearly, this characteristic of greater interiority and more infused prayer is something that grows throughout middle age.

***Mid-life and  
the emergence  
of a spiritual  
self***

At the beginning of Augustine's *Confessions* we find the famous saying, 'you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you'; the narrative speaks of a God 'more inward than my most inward part'; even as Augustine was seeking the God of his heart outside himself, 'I was wholly ignorant of what it is in ourselves which gives us being, and how scripture is correct in saying that we are in God's image'.<sup>16</sup> Of course, such profound spiritual insight usually comes about slowly, with the process lasting for the rest of a person's life. But it is most likely to begin in mid-life. The greater our interiority and intimacy with God, the more does our inner life take on this

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1; 3.6; 10.22; 3.27.

additional dimension. This is part of the mystery Augustine was referring to.<sup>17</sup>

There are convergences between Erikson's idea of generativity and the changes and deepening in ministry that are normal in a healthy middle age. But here too, there are also depths of the spiritual life which Erikson's language does not fully express. Erikson believed that one of the main concerns driving generativity is self-verification: did I make my mark? For Christians, the spiritual challenge of mid-life is to let go of ego concerns. We are being led into a new kind of identification with Christ, where such ego-interests are exposed as part of one's false self. A truly spiritual mid-life is generative, but not self-preoccupied. It is the time of a new, deeper cooperation with the indwelling God.

### ***The Elderly and the Unitive Way***

The unitive way, as presented in traditional spiritual language, is extraordinary and rare. Teresa of Avila will define it as a kind of total forgetting of self in espousal to Christ,<sup>18</sup> and John of the Cross will identify it in terms of a divinised soul living out of the very love of God.<sup>19</sup> Few elderly people will easily identify with such language. But I believe that there are properly unitive dynamics in many elderly people, evincing a profound freedom in the Spirit and a palpable knowledge of God in their lives.

Even Erikson describes possibilities of profound wholeness in elderhood, a wholeness that is no longer dependent on exterior roles. Elderly people can come to accept their own weaknesses. There are striking parallels here with what is said in the tradition about the unitive way.

<sup>17</sup> Theophilus of Antioch was asked by a pagan, 'Show me your God'. He replied, 'Show me yourself and I will show you my God'. Theophilus means here, I believe, that human nature reflects the divine mystery and that the two are unutterable. See Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, translated by Anthony P. Gythiel and Victoria Steadman (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 50.

<sup>18</sup> *Interior Castle*, 7.3.2: 'the first effect [of union] is a forgetfulness of self, for truly the soul, seemingly, no longer is'.

<sup>19</sup> *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2.5.7: '... so great a union is caused that all the things of both God and the soul become one in participant transformation, and the soul appears to be God more than a soul. Indeed, it is God by participation'. See also Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 7.2.4: 'Let us say that the union is like the joining of two wax candles to such an extent that the flame coming from them is but one, or that the wick, the flame, and the wax are all one'.

The ultimate weakness inherent in all of life, but ever more clear now, is our own mortality. The philosopher Martin Heidegger taught that everything in life moves toward death, and he is not alone.<sup>20</sup> This truth is not something that resonates with a young adult. Few of them think much about death, and when they do it is mostly with aversion. A faith-filled older person faces it quite directly, without fear. If the elderly have negotiated well the problem of integrity and affirmed the meaning of their own lives and of life in general, they will be able to reach beyond selfish concerns and nostalgia, and to continue giving of themselves freely.

***A faith-filled  
older person  
faces death  
without fear***

What is the role of the elderly for the church and for the world? In a word, they provide *wisdom*, Erikson's final strength. Their sheer breadth of experience and love should make them a presence that inspires, heals, and models a faithful existence. Their experience of God's love and their trust makes them living witnesses to God's providence.

What should one's prayer life be like in the *unitive way*? Now, it is simply a matter of being with God, an intimacy that can sustain one at every moment of day-to-day life. There is a well-known story of St John Vianney, who regularly found one of the older men in his parish in the church in the middle of the day just sitting in a pew. Finally John Vianney asked the man, 'What are you praying about?' He responded, 'I'm not praying *about* anything. I just look at God and he looks at me.' Fully integrated elderly people not only know about God; they also know this mysterious presence of God intimately. The growing intimacy characterizing development through middle age often comes to a greater flowering here in the evening of our lives.

Once again, Erikson's account of old age is helpful, but leaves important Christian dimensions unnamed. There is indeed a new form of integrity possible, even and especially in the face of death. But this integrity comes from intimately knowing the Lord of Life who has himself passed through death. For Teilhard, the diminishments

<sup>20</sup> Augustine says it succinctly: 'Everyone is in death from the moment that they begin their bodily existence. For what else is going on, every day, every hour, every minute, but this process of death?' (*City of God*, 13.1.1)



Old Woman Frying Eggs (detail), by Diego Velázquez

that come particularly with old age are the very vehicle God uses to transfigure our sufferings, allowing God fully to deliver us from the bondage of all attachments:

The more deeply and incurably the evil is encrusted in my flesh, the more it will be you that I am harbouring—you as a loving, active principle of purification and detachment.<sup>21</sup>

Even as one faces death physically, and indeed in the context of all the losses that accompany elderhood, a deep life in the Spirit recognises God's mercy. Teilhard's prayer is this:

O God, grant that I may understand that it is you who are painfully parting the fibres of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within yourself.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, 90.

<sup>22</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, 89-90.

There is another important point of difference between Erikson's wise elderhood and a full Christian spirituality. A unitive knowledge of God draws us really to *lose* our identity in God. Erikson describes elderhood in terms of new challenges that enable us to develop an authentic identity.<sup>23</sup> Those who go along the unitive way realise that any attempt to construct our identity misses the mark. In the paschal mystery, we so align ourselves with and in God that we recognise no real distinction between our truest selves and God's grace. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, perhaps Merton's most mature book, he repeatedly describes this fullest reality of the unitive life:

The secret of my full identity is hidden in Him....

To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character, Love is my name ...

... [one] lives in emptiness and freedom, as if one had no longer a limited and exclusive *self* that distinguished one from God and others....

What happens is that the separate identity that is you apparently disappears and nothing seems to be left but a pure freedom indistinguishable from the infinite Freedom, love identified with Love ...

He is the *I* who acts there. He is the one Who loves and knows and rejoices.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps this account of a humanly and spiritually developed elderly person lacks nuance; perhaps it is even a little glib. One elderly person told me recently, 'this inner strength Erikson speaks of is hardly a compensation for the breakdown of our health'. Another colleague suggested that many elderly people she knows have a terrible time with pain and personal loss. For them, prayer, if they can pray at all, is more an act of blind faith than an experience of intimacy with God. Of course, this presentation is somewhat idealized, as are Erikson's stages.

<sup>23</sup> See Erikson and others, *Vital Involvement in Old Age*.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Direction Books, 1961), 33, 60, 210, 283, 286-287, exclusive language corrected.

Of course too, the challenges of aging and loss are daunting. But an actualised, unitive life is indeed possible. In my ministry to elderly parishioners, to nursing home residents, to a large group of semi-retired sisters, and to a convent of mostly elderly contemplative nuns, I have often witnessed profound faith, wisdom and witness.

When Mabel died I had the honour of presiding over her funeral. She was not a public presence in the social or civic community. Even in church she kept a low profile. So I was amazed when the funeral started and I saw the church packed with people. They came to honour not a woman who had *done* anything extraordinary, but a woman who had *become transformed into* something extraordinary—even as her life was simple. Is the evening of life one of fruition or folly? I know that fruition is a real possibility. It is exemplified by the likes of Mabel. It expresses itself as a gentle, humble, gracious, loving wisdom. This is the challenge and the gift of a fully human and fully spiritual life lived well.

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