



# Engaging Aging

## Aging in the Fullness of Time

By Sister Ann Lyons, FSSJ

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*“...convert, convert ourselves every day, one step forward every day.”*

*Pope Francis*

*Angelus Message, December 4, 2016*

I believe that the credibility of the life and ideals of Francis of Assisi arises out of the connections made when people are free to engage in mutual exchange about their most passionate experiences of the holy. As Franciscans, we find meaning in the stories of Francis and Clare of Assisi, and these become our own stories. We are called to co-author our tradition and co-create our future. We are called to be faithful to the truth we experience.

Each of us who has taken this path has to bring a whole life that starts at a point in time and includes all the people of one's life, all the happiness, all the cherished moments, all the sorrow as well as all the trials. Our lives advance step by step and are a story of an inner and outer journey. Aging in the fullness of time suggests taking a thoughtful look at how we live. It involves a readiness to allow the events of our lives, the message of the Gospel, as well as the example of Francis and Clare to transform our lives. This living requires discipline that keeps us focused on what is happening now. It is reverencing the present moment as full, rich, and pregnant. Living in the fullness of time has to do with our everyday living.

The Incarnation is the theological bedrock upon which to build this understanding of time. Jesus is our perfect example of living in the fullness of

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## Aging in the Fullness of Time, continued

time precisely in his humanness. He lived, loved, prayed, hoped, celebrated, suffered and died. He is the sacred personification of everyday life that binds us to one another and to God. For Franciscans, the Incarnation continues to happen in our own time as we give birth to Christ in our world.

As we age, our challenge is to make an evaluation of our lives as meaningful. For years, we have been associated with our ministry. Aging is bringing about a change in our social identity. We can expect some feeling of loss in the separation from a familiar role and a sense of self-worth. We are no longer what we used to be. Our lives are no longer so much about doing but about being. It is about “letting it be done unto me” (Lk 1:38). At this time in our lives, we are afforded the opportunity to make the four fundamental Gospel values of conversion, contemplation, humility and poverty—which are so important to Franciscans—a lived reality.

### CONVERSION

Franciscan spirituality is the life process of applying to ourselves Francis’ way of encountering and experiencing God. For Francis, God is known eminently in Christ, the Christ of the Gospels who announces repentance and peace for all. The Gospel Way for Francis was total investment of self, the total handing over of self to God, and the total commitment of self to God’s purpose—a continuous conversion.

Ilia Delio states, “Conversion is a way of becoming more authentically human—through an interior attitude of ‘turning’ from a selfish self toward a God-centered self, from self-preoccupation toward the other as the basis of self.” Aging calls us to a conversion that moves us from

tolerating to embracing and, finally, to welcoming “Sister Change.” This conversion is more than just accepting the external change; it requires a deep soul searching change. Aging is more than behavior modification or adaptation. It is a renewal of mind and spirit. This conversion is an ongoing transformation of our whole being, body, mind and soul, because we do not merely change; we are converted.

Our vocation is to go beyond merely the interest of everyday life. It is to take on a spirit of letting go to give birth to the new. Letting go involves mixed feelings and can leave us lonely and disenchanted. It is important then that this be a time of deepening relationships with God, with community, with the world. We must examine our lives and values and be open to the freshness of our present call to be with one another

Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph Sisters Emily Therese Bloom, Jean Marie Cherry, Paula Zelazo, and (seated) Martha Marie Olszewski. (Photo used with permission of FSSJ)



## Aging in the Fullness of Time, continued

in a spirit of openness and joy for what is yet to be. Our faith in the presence of the Spirit in all of life is our support. As we age, we become who we are through the years of openness to the workings of the Spirit within us. The wisdom we exhibit is a result of what we have lived and been over many seasons.

### CONTEMPLATION

Contemplation was the searing presence of the Gospel in Clare of Assisi's life. Clare was quite certain that if she simply permitted divine love to light up her own life, others would be drawn by

that radiance. She did not destroy her natural capacity for love but rather purified it, enlarged it and developed it to the fullest perfection. This love of Christ was the heart of her existence that gave her life direction; it permeated her desires, thoughts and actions.

Aging brings about a shift in our use of time. This is our time to live a graceful period in which we delight in God's love, share our love, and return the gifts received. More than ever, we now realize that we have been called to a vocation of prayer. There is something deeper than action. This shift of focus is not a disparaging of action

Pictured below, the painting of the Holy Spirit is an original artwork created by Sister Geraldine Rutkowski, FSSJ. In addition to receiving a bachelor's and master's degree in art, Sister Geraldine studied at Alverno College under the direction of Sister Helena, OSF. Sister Geraldine passed away on May 4, 2005, at 92 years of age. The painting is on display in Immaculate Conception Convent, Hamburg, New York. (Photo by Sr. Lynne Anne Schimminger, FSSJ. Used with permission of FSSJ.)



## Aging in the Fullness of Time, continued



Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph gather in prayer in the main chapel of Immaculate Conception Convent, Hamburg, NY. The new motherhouse is a platinum certified LEED building. (Photo used with permission of FSSJ)

but a reminder that it is the spiritual that is at the heart of our calling. It is a reaching deeply into the inner vision that gives direction to our life and is a means of bringing God to the here and now. The fruit of our old age has the possibility to yield an abundance.

### **HUMILITY**

Having been loved by his Creator within his heart, and learning through his discernment Francis, in great humility, sought new ways of following the Gospel and walking in the footprints of Christ. As he becomes lowly, recognizing who he is before God, then God is able to lift him up. We can never come to a deep prayer until we know that we are creatures and God is Creator. This awareness of who God is and what God does, sustained by reflection and prayer, strengthened Francis' understanding that nothing lacks the capacity for God's gift of redemption in Christ.

When we know who we are, we are able to share ourselves with one another. In loving others, we acknowledge the presence of God in the

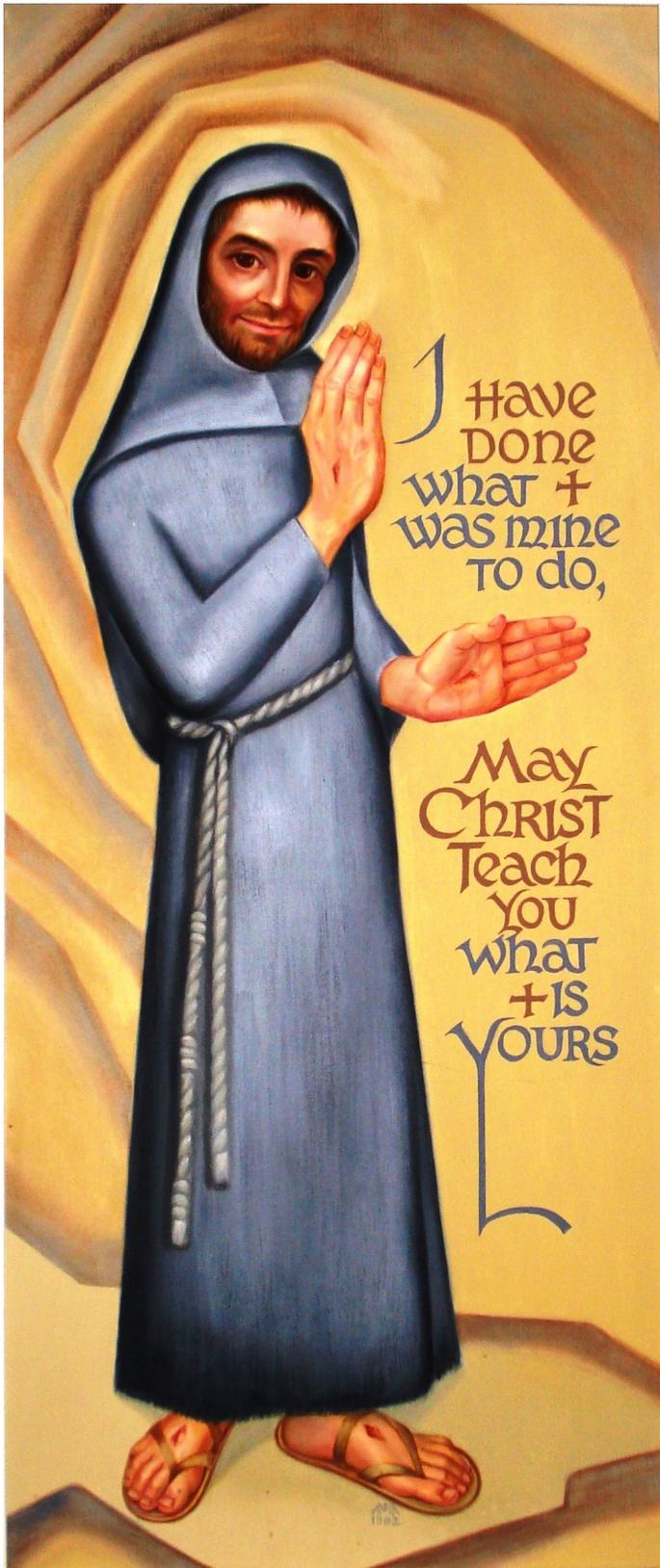
other, and we give one another life. This experience can bring us to our knees in humble gratitude. Prayer is the place where we are best able to face the reality of who we are and who God calls us to be. It is where we make the connection between our spiritual and everyday life. We recognize that the past has shaped us, but it does not control our present. We must give up our illusions of control and let our future rest in God's hands.

The transparency and vulnerability of aging calls us not only to authenticity but also to love. In accepting our limitations, we can share with others our spiritual journey with all its trials and blessings. We are able to accept that others have wisdom and experience from which we can benefit. This happens when we break open the stories of our lives and truly become companions to one another. Our life is a journey into the fullness of life, a journey of love of God, others, and self. Humility has the power to transform our hearts into hearts of gratitude.

### **POVERTY**

The joyful change of heart that comes from hearing the Good News of salvation made Clare of Assisi a recipient of Christ's love. With grateful and reverent attitude, she received everything from God, and her responses involved more than just an openness to receive the gift. Her poverty was a consequence of her choice "...made out of love of the God, who was placed poor in the crib, lived poor in the world, and remained naked on the cross." Poverty was not a goal in itself. For Clare, the true goal was a transformation into the likeness of Christ by following His example. Dispossessed of things Clare had nothing to defend; she was free. Her heart was unencumbered. Poverty allowed her

## Aging in the Fullness of Time, continued



The picture of St. Francis, an original artwork by Sr. Geraldine Rutkowski, FSSJ, hangs in the library of Immaculate Conception Convent in Hamburg, NY. (Used with permission of FSSJ).

to trust in God and to live in right relationship with God and others. Detachment from material possessions and self-giving in imitation of Christ were treasures highly valued because they led to tolerance, acceptance and, finally, mutual love.

As we age, we are able to reclaim our sense of awe and wonder at the mysteries and beauty of the gift of life. Simplicity, a willingness to let go of things and possessions which have often times cluttered our lives, frees us for God. Poverty of spirit teaches us that this is a time of accepting our life and recognizing that we own nothing, that our life is continuously interdependent upon others and that our losses are redeemed and restored in God. We are simply stewards of our lives, our goods, and our relationships. Standing in trust, believing that our loss is redeemed in and by God, we can share our precious gift of wisdom as a means of witness and enlightenment to others.

#### GRATITUDE

Gathering memories of persons who have inspired and challenged us, we realize that they reflected attitudes and demonstrated behaviors that become easier to appreciate and imitate as we grow older and expand our capacity for gratitude. The frenzy of our earlier years lessens, and we have time to notice, to enjoy, to be grateful. This gratitude becomes a prayer—a prayer that can fill our days. Living in the fullness of time, we pay attention to the ways of mystery emerging in our life, the way we are called to love, and the way we daily experience God's care-filled presence. Then, we can echo Francis and say: "I have done what was mine to do, may Christ teach you what is yours."

## RESOURCES

### Books

Bianchi, E.C. (2011). *Aging as a Spiritual Journey*. Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Rohr, R. (2011). *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. California: Jossey-Bass.

### Web Resources

Boudreau, E. (2015). *Spirituality is Comforting in the Aging Process*. Catholic Register, Canada. <http://www.catholicregister.org/features/life-family/item/21403-spirituality-is-comforting-in-the-aging-process>

Nickasch, C. (2012). *Secular Franciscan Spirituality and Aging*. In D.O. Moberg (Ed.), *Aging and Spirituality: Spiritual Dimensions of Aging Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* (pp.147–156). New York: Routledge. (2012) Routledge: New York <https://books.google.com/books?id=ngcsBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA149&lpg=PA149&dq=franciscan+spirituality+and+aging&source=bl&ots=p1aBjfxTCe&sig=TW0HborgYExvqnHtBlvdK7ETUyg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiColqFleXQAhUCTSYKHeauCUwQ6AEIJTAB#v=onepage&q=franciscan%20spirituality%20and%20aging&f=false>

Rolheiser, R. *Beyond Spirituality 101: Discipleship for the Second Half of Life*. <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/rolheiser/>

## From the Editor's Desk

### Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

There is a saying often attributed to St. Francis: "Preach the Gospel; use words if necessary." But research seems to indicate that there is no historical evidence of Francis ever having said this. After reading Sr. Ann's article, I would tend to agree.



How could a spirituality so grounded in incarnational realities, so steeped in the beauty of storytelling and story listening ever go without words?

What I think Francis and Clare do offer us is the beauty and challenge of a spiritual tradition that embraces the Grand Encounter. Always encouraged beyond our circumspect view, we are called to stand or sit in full assurance that welcoming Love will meet us everywhere, always. Importantly, that same love, holding all judgment in abeyance, is ours to convey to others.

In this Advent season of gentle darkness and haunting hymns, we can be tempted toward the lovely. We can imagine small creatures eating bread from the snow-lined folds of Francis' cowl, inspiring us to love creation. But the spirituality Sr. Ann writes of has teeth. Conversion, contemplation, humility, and poverty don't drop easily into any sentence, much less into life.

And so it is with aging. I think you'll find that Franciscan spirituality has a great deal to say to all of us as we tangle with this thing called "growing older." Perhaps, on our journey to standing naked and vulnerable in the town square of our lives, we will find, like St. Francis, that this very place is not the end, but the beginning of our greatest journey. Merry Christmas!

## From the Offices of NRRO

**Brother Bob Metzger, SM, Associate Director for Planning and Education**

In the Winter, 2014 issue of *Engaging Aging*, Sr. Marjorie Robinson, OCD wrote an article on what St. Teresa of Avila's writings would have to say about the aging process. Sr. Margaret Palliser, OP described St. Dominic's thoughts on the aging process in last winter's issue of this newsletter. This year Sr. Ann Lyons, FSSJ uses the writings of St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi to see what they might have to say about aging in religious life.



In her article she says the four Gospel values of conversion, contemplation, humility and poverty are important to Franciscans. For aging religious this can be translated to the values of openness, prayer, love and simplicity in our lives. These values continue to challenge us in our daily living even as we age. I pray that during this Advent and Christmas we may all be more open to living these values in our daily lives.

As I write these words it is a few days before the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious. This year marks the 29<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the collection and it continues to be extremely successful. This success is due to the generosity of the donors and the dedicated work of the religious sisters, brothers and priests for whom this collection assists. Please continue to remember these donors in your prayers at Christmas and throughout the year. Let us also pray in thanksgiving for the bishops' approval of the extension of the collection through 2027.

### Calendar

#### January 2

- Direct Care Assistance applications mailed

#### January 22 - 24 and January 24 -26

- Informational meetings on Planning and Implementation Assistance; San Antonio, TX

#### February 14

- NRRO webinar. Topic TBD

#### March 31

- Direct Care Assistance applications due

***Please join the staff  
of the National Religious  
Retirement Office  
as we give thanks  
this Christmas for the  
generosity of our many  
friends and benefactors.  
We pray that the birth  
of the Christ Child  
will bring peace and joy  
to your life and to our  
world throughout the  
coming year.***

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The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these funds to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs. Our mission is to support, educate, and assist religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

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