

RELIGIOUS IN RETIREMENT**"CONSECRATED AND SENT"****Br. Paul Griéger***"Planted in the house of Yahweh... still bearing fruit in old age" (Ps 92)*

The ageing of the population, as predicted by the OMS, is one of the most important characteristics of the final years of this century. It will play an increasingly significant role not only in the lives of old people, but also in the evolution of society, religious life and our communities.

Psychologists say that understanding old people consists not so much in taking their age into account as knowing the exact details of their personal situation, their past experiences, and the way in which they are coping with the transition to a different lifestyle.

When people grow old they soon realise that for them the end of the road is in sight. And so when people think and speak about "growing old" their view tends to be a pessimistic one. Of course, the truth of the matter is irrefutable! But it should not prevent people from understanding that to grow old is not to die. In our days, the process of growing old is no longer seen as a final state, but as a stage in a person's overall development. As modern terminology has it, it is the "third age".

a. A time of transition

The third age stage is characterised by profound changes in the life of a person: the end of his professional life; changes in his social relations; and changes in personal behaviour.

Not working anymore is still nowadays the most obvious sign that a person has retired. Retirement age, 65 in many countries, is fixed by law.

From the psychological point of view, it has been noted that this transition causes most apprehension at the beginning of the "pre-retirement" stage (before 60). The way in which people react to retirement from professional life depends a great deal on how they look upon their vocation: as an affirmation of their worth as a person, a framework for their life, a source of personal satisfaction, a constraint or a trial. It depends also on the individual's psychological maturity and his personal psycho-affective difficulties which will now reveal themselves in a different context.

There are some characteristic reactions to this situation: some fill the gap left by retirement by undertaking some other form of work; others suffer a mental-nervous breakdown, or existing problems become aggravated.

Adapting more easily to this new stage in life called the third age, and being able to live with some degree of serenity, depend to a large extent on psychological and spiritual preparation. This depends also on the province's or congregation's ability to see the positive aspects of their retired members. What is needed above all at community level is a fundamental change in social attitudes.

The change in social relations is much more complex. Several studies indicate that most old people who were interviewed preferred to live with a certain degree of independence. They wanted, however, to maintain social contact with former colleagues and friends. What is wanted, therefore, is "affective proximity" together with some exterior distancing, or in other words, closeness but with room to move.

At present, there are no well-defined structures in communities (houses, homes, living rooms, chapel, etc) hosting still active elderly religious. Without doubt, one of the urgent practical problems is the reorganisation of existing so-called homes for old Brothers which are like infirmaries.

The provision of a suitable diet for the elderly is important. They are rarely well informed on this matter and even more rarely aware of attendant consequences. Eating habits are formed very early on in life and it is very difficult to change them. Those in charge of catering only too often lack the imagination to organise a suitable diet which will genuinely benefit elderly persons.

Finally there is a profound change in personal behaviour. With age, changes occur in the way a person lives. These changes are readily noticeable in individuals but they differ from person to person. They can generally be listed under two main categories which are not mutually exclusive:

- stronger psycho-affective reactions: anxiety, anguish, worries;

- defence mechanisms: introversion, voluntary isolation, self-withdrawal. Defence is a regulatory factor in the process of moderation and adaptation. It is only when it is distorted or functions inadequately that it becomes a pathological defence mechanism.

In the clinical psychology of elderly people there is a high proportion of problems connected with affectivity. All conflicts have their origin in either instinctive tendencies or pathological affective reactions. Among the innumerable forms they can take, one can mention the following very general ones: depression accompanied by apathy and negative attitudes; habitual sadness accompanied by apparent discomfort and attitudes of withdrawal; dejection, exaggerated worry.

Pierre Janet expressed this very well when he wrote: "Because of the risky nature of the adventure it offers to the individual, the principle of change implies that the individual will tend to hold back and this itself can upset him".

b. The special situation of elderly religious

Consecrated life, as opposed to professional and social life, does not call for clearly perceived efficiency in practical matters, administration or management. Its profound meaning and theological value remain unchanged whatever the situation, because it is before all else a mystery of God's covenant with men that never ceases to be a reality and that can always be strengthened. More than ever, the elderly religious is called to live out his vocation and pursue the mission of the Institute in a different sort of way: by continuing the work of evangelisation "together and by association", through prayer, suffering and witness.

*"Whoever works for the Kingdom of God does much;
whoever prays for the Kingdom of God does more;
whoever suffers for the Kingdom of God does all."
(John Paul II, Oss.Rom.8/3/85)*

For these reasons and others, the time when a religious begins to retire gradually can be a very fruitful time apostolically, not only because of the experience and wisdom that characterise his new kinds of relations with others, but also because a religious who lives serenely, allowing himself to be led by the grace of the Lord, is no longer interested in planning his activities as in the past, but entrusts himself completely to God and his infinite love.

It is important therefore to encourage an apostolic kind of spirituality in communities where old Brothers live. This will allow religious, who have lived their lives generously in the service of God and the poor, to put to valuable use their deepest and richest personal gifts: their love for Christ and the desire to follow him "usque ad mortem", in imitation of their Master who sacrificed himself for them.

But when St Paul speaks of the Spirit being our life (Gal 5,25) he presupposes a moment when the Christian dies with Christ crucified and becomes a new man with the risen Christ. This is the doctrine of conversion.

What does "becoming converted" mean? To answer this question satisfactorily we need to analyse what the New Testament calls "metanoia". The nearest translation of this term is probably "conversion of heart".

According to the Gospel, the "heart" is the centre of the personality. It is here that a person acts and communes with God. It is here that decisions are made that bring into play the mind, will, freedom and fidelity. It is here that conscience reflects God's call and judgment. In a word, the worth of a

man before God and in his own eyes is what his heart is worth. That is why Jesus put at the heart of his religion the responsibility each person accepts in his heart, in response to God's word, for his salvation or damnation: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt 6,21).

For the elderly religious, therefore, "becoming converted" will mean accepting totally and assimilating the message and views of Jesus on life, destiny and on death which is no longer a frightening black abyss. Death enables the person to take part in a transformation by which God's magnanimity changes the end into a new beginning. This is the transition that leads to the "new life".

And so for us, as disciples of Christ, death is this final step which we bravely take, holding Christ's hand, as we go toward our promised reward. Although death can bring oppression, dislocation, powerlessness and sadness, it contains also Christ's death. What we see, however, is only one face of reality: the other face is called Resurrection.

"And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old creation has gone, and now the new one is here" (2 Cor 5,17).

"I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live" (Jn 11,25-26).

In this way we will be in a position to enter into intimate union with Christ while waiting for the day of his final return. We will be able to make our own the words of the Psalmist (Ps 121):

*I lift my eyes to the mountains:
where is help to come from?
Help comes to me from Yahweh,
who made heaven and earth.
No letting our footsteps slip!
This guard of yours, he does not doze!
The guardian of Israel
does not doze or sleep.
Yahweh guards you, shades you.
With Yahweh at your right hand
sun cannot strike you down by day,
nor moon at night.
Yahweh guards you from harm,
he guards your lives,
he guards you leaving, coming back,
now and for always. ●*

**The European Commission has dedicated 1993
to the elderly and to solidarity between generations.
This article by Br. Paul Griéger about elderly religious
was prepared as a contribution to the various meetings that will mark this year all over Europe.
We think it could be of interest for religious and elderly people
in other continents also.**