

EMBRACING OLD AGE AND OUR FUTURE SELVES

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The headlines jumped off the screen. One paired the words, “Pope Francis” and the “Magisterium of Fragility.”¹ Another read, “Pope Francis’s Preferential Option for Elders: Our Penchant for Disposability, Especially of Our Elders, Is Sinful.”² As the pope’s lung condition took a toll on his overall physical health and led to a weeks-long hospitalization, he pressed forward with what he could do as he exerted his intrinsic dignity.

For example, he maintained a daily ritual of calling the Holy Family Church in Gaza each evening. Like a loving grandparent inquiring to know the day’s activities of his own family, their struggles, their sources for food and shelter, and especially their safety, he expressed through his words and actions his desire to be close to them, even when geographically removed.³

Those headlines aptly captured an essence not merely of this pontiff’s style but also of the broader theological tradition, grounded in the Gospels. The word *magisterium* refers to authority related to teaching the Catholic faith. The headline mentioning this term suggests that individuals experiencing the frailty of human life, especially those of advanced age, carry an authority that the rest of us ought to heed. Stated differently, the lives of elders have a claim on our lives.

The other headline aptly riffs off liberation theology’s preferential option for those who are poor. It suggests deep connections in the lived experience between those enduring poverty and those advanced in age. Society tends to see both as problems to “solve,” an inconvenience pushed to the peripheries. Their voices are often muffled, if heard at all — literally and figuratively. And yet, the theological and spiritual depths of the Catholic tradition reflect how people who are poor and advanced in age enjoy recognition as a place for God’s activity in the world. The Lord hears the cry of the poor (Psalm 34). God grants an elderly couple, Abraham and Sarah, children and descendants as numerous as the stars (Genesis 22:17-18), and Elizabeth, in her old age, bears a son (Luke 1:13).

During Pope Francis’ last months, he embraced the dignity of an elder. He exemplified what he had been teaching and preaching in places such as his encyclical on fraternity, an initiative by the Pontifical Academy for Life titled “Old Age: Our Future: The Elderly After the Pandemic,” and a 2021 Netflix miniseries on people 70 and over, titled *Stories of a Generation — With Pope Francis*.⁴ His experience with serious illness and prolonged hospitalization in the acute and intensive care setting put him in a spotlight where, years prior, he had previously shone a light on old age.

By most accounts, the late pontiff adapted to the limitations and realities of his physiological conditions. His example stands out against a driving quest among intellectuals, scientists and tech elites to “solve” for death.⁵ There’s no secret that our American culture places a premium on youthfulness, antiaging diets and fitness regimens. A well-documented denial of death has expanded to a disdain for the ordinary and natural transition of the human experience of aging.⁶

Embracing and normalizing the human experience of aging does not come easily. It requires systemic structures to ease the way, as well as individual shifts in a person’s perception of old age. These shifts necessitate spirituality and a formation of the human heart.

ENSURING DIGNITY IN ELDERCARE

The rapid aging of the U.S. population makes this shift more urgent than ever. The number of Americans age 65 and older is projected to increase from 58 million in 2022 to 82 million by 2050 (a 47% increase), and the 65 and older age group is

projected to rise from 17% of the total population to 23%.⁷ Most older people have at least one chronic health condition, and many suffer from multiple health issues.⁸

In health care, innovations such as Age-Friendly Health Systems, Program of All-Inclusive Care of the Elderly (PACE), palliative care and geriatric emergency departments recognize that the current delivery system must be changed to meet the unique needs of older adults and to ensure and

resources, including “Ministry Formation for All Workers,” provide guidance.⁹ They often remind caregivers why they originally felt called to this work. As one formation leader used to say, “And when we remember, we recommit.”

Similarly, a short formative reflection can draw upon stories from the past. By remembering our roots, especially stories of how the founding congregation cared for widows, elders and others ostracized by society, we can reimagine our work

today. While work in today’s care environment involves the complexities of technology, documentation and regulatory compliance, the actual care for elders is not that different from how this ministry began.

Lastly, formation in these care settings can highlight multiple dimensions of the inestimable dignity of life, especially as it pertains and

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honor their right to care. But providers face many challenges in making these innovations widespread: changing established practices, ageism and a scarcity of resources. This is why formation is so important; it provides the inner motivation and strength needed to push through these barriers to build a system of care that honors the dignity of older people.

FORMATION FOR CAREGIVERS

We offer thoughts on formation activities that could support the work and ministry of those caring for older people. These suggestions can support outpatient clinical settings and other parts of the care continuum, as older adults access multiple points of care delivery (primary care, pharmacies, physical therapy, etc.) at higher rates than younger adults. Creating a welcoming environment is one step, and fostering a sensitive and empathetic workforce to the experiences of older people requires more. Progress can be made with support from formative experiences.

First, ministries can continue commitments to formation touchstones for hourly associates. These entail simple routine reflections and prayer integrated into team huddles. These formative moments aim to connect personal meaning and values with the work at hand. New CHA

applies to older people. This is significant in a society that may unfairly value people for their work productivity or digital activity, rather than their innate dignity. This recognition also increases older adults’ visibility in social spaces and allows them further opportunities to think, talk and socialize. Having a critical mass of caregivers who sincerely see with a lens that Pope Francis offered — that being elderly is a gift from God — will not happen on its own. It happens with a commitment to cultivating an acute awareness of the multiplicity of gifts that older people shower upon us, our families and society. The heightened awareness may spawn growth in patience, a slower pace or enlarged compassion for elders.

FORMATION FOR OUR AGING EXPERIENCE

Whatever the year of our birth, all of us are called to recognize and accept that we, too, will likely advance in years ourselves. Our bodies and appearances will change. Our mobility will likely slow and shorten. Our awareness of and dependence on others will increase. The question becomes, how might we experience and perceive the subtle changes that will unfold, likely over very long stretches of time? What kind of older person do we hope to become?

Drawing forth that inner desire of who we

hope to become will require intentionality. Attending to the shape and rhythms of our life — our habits — will form our future selves. Here are four considerations:

“We must not fear old age,” wrote the late pontiff.¹⁰ As is said and is true, Jesus’ most frequented words were “Do not be afraid!” Growing old is an ordinary aspect of being human. It is perhaps one of the most natural things for us to do.

Second, curtail fears may entail noticing our thoughts, assumptions and judgments about older people. Instead of caving to the mind’s fixation on negative attributes, shift the attention to the goodness and blessings of advanced years. As the pope suggested, old does not mean worthless. Instead, allow “old” to reference “experience, wisdom, understanding, discernment, prudence, attentiveness, slowness — all values we desperately need!”¹¹

Third, do things with older people. Take them to dinner. Check in with them. Send cards in the mail. Reminisce and ask them about their lives and experiences. Demonstrate and tell them how much they are cherished. Look intently at them and consciously see and reverence their dignity, even as their own life may be changing and impacting their mind, mobility and more. All the while, recognize that one day we will likely inhabit this space. In other words, do to them what you would want others to do to you when you are advanced in years.

Lastly, decide now who you want to become. How might we foster a disposition that counteracts a natural tendency toward crankiness or resistance to change? How might we foster characteristics marked by trust in oneself and others, and gratitude, faith, hope, love and so forth? Human will can lead us to where we want to go. And our own formation can help us get there.

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NOTES

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