

Life's Living Toward Dying

A Prayer for Grace as We Age

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INTRODUCTION

In 1904, Lucile Randon was born in southern France. After various kinds of work, she entered the Daughters of Charity as Sr. André. She did spiritual and mission work till her retirement in 1979, but even then, she continued to care for her fellow elderly sisters. When she died in 2023, she was just days short of her 119th birthday and was, at that time, the oldest person in the world.

If that isn't a story of graceful aging and longevity, I don't know what is!

The Scriptures are full of stories about aging and longevity. Moses is reputed to have lived to 120, and Methuselah to 969. The Hebrew Scriptures generally see aging as a reward for a virtuous life. Proverbs, for example, says "Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained by a life that is just." (Proverbs 16:31) It also says "For by me your days will be multiplied and the years of your life increased." (Proverbs 9:11)

We often refer to our latter years, when we are relieved of the burden of work and can enjoy our time, as our "golden years." These are beautiful sentiments, but as I grow older myself, I sometimes have doubts. Old age, after all, is full of challenges, and we don't always see longevity as a blessing. Age brings diminished physical and mental capabilities, and for some it brings isolation and loss of friendships and family members, leaving us only with our memories. Clare Boothe Luce, writer

and politician, once quipped later in life that she was in her anecdotage, the time of her life when she could remember and share many old stories, but not much else!

We tend to associate old age with death, and today we have ways of dealing with death. Euthanasia, assisted suicide and "medical assistance in dying" have become much more common. Clearly, we don't see longevity as an unalloyed blessing.

We are living much longer than previous generations. We may have 15, 20 or even 30 years of life after retirement. What do we do with that time? Can we accept aging (and the prospect of death) with gratitude? Can we claim it as a blessing or is it a burden? Can we, like Sr. André, continue to serve others even as we age?

PAUSE, REFLECT AND PRAY

I searched Scripture to find passages that were helpful to me in thinking about my own longevity, whatever it might look like. There were two passages I particularly liked, which have inspired me to write this simple prayer:

Assume a contemplative, comfortable posture, perhaps with your eyes closed.

Take time to let everything drift out of your head. Begin a steady rhythm of soft breathing.

Then, review the signs of your own

aging, good and bad. Reflect on past losses, mistakes and misfortunes, but don't let them take control. Reflect on all you have to be grateful for.

Then, slowly read and repeat one of the following passages:

"For I know well the plans I have in mind for you — oracle of the Lord — plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope." (Jeremiah 29:11)

"We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

Then, pray:

God of life, You have brought me thus far. I thank You for the gifts of the life I am living, for my friends, my vocation and my family. I know Your plan for me includes losses and diminishment, but I ask for the faith to accept them as I bind myself more closely to the suffering of Christ and to that of the many faithful souls who have preceded me.

Help me to offer my remaining years as a prayerful gift to You, and to serve others to the extent that I am able. Let me be a sign to others of Your faithfulness and hope. Above all, let me, like Sr. André, be grateful. Amen.

NOTE

I have borrowed this title from Vigen Guroian's wonderful reflection on life and death, *Life's Living Toward Dying* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996).