

# *franciscan* - September 1998

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## **Spirituality and Ageing**

**By Sister Elsie Felicity OSC**

As a nun in my eighties people imagine I know something about 'spirituality and ageing'. If it means the dealings of the soul with God, then how is that going to differ if one is old or young? Every individual is unique. Of course I have changed. I sincerely hope so, but who I was when I was twenty or sixty is the person I am now. I cannot write this other than personally – I do not know what 'old age' is for another person. The idea that I may have 'acquired wisdom honed by experience' is certainly not evident to me.

I do know that my values have altered. I had come to believe with difficulty, which often meant that I was pretty dogmatic about matters of (as I thought) faith. Now I know that much of what I believed was only relative. The essentials remain. The boundaries between sacred and secular have become increasingly blurred. The more I see of the world the more I see of the compassion of God. How could we survive, let alone live meaningful lives, were God not wholly love?

A very liberating thing is that it now matters less what other people think of me. I can no longer do anything about it so what is the point of worrying about others' opinions? In the years when I was having to prove myself – make it clear by my actions that I was as capable, as adequate as the next, to make decisions about the lives of myself and others – I had to believe I was able to achieve fulfilment by my own efforts. Now I know I cannot change myself, let alone change anyone else. Perhaps age is giving me a little more appreciation of others and I am able to delight in their differences without always wondering why they are not like me!

I am very blessed in living in a community which not only provides for my physical needs, so that I am freed from the anxiety which besets so many old people, but also gives me all I can possibly need in the ways of spiritual support and help; and I am surrounded by love. This all helps to make my life before God one of very great gratitude. Even though there are now many things I cannot see clearly, the things which I can see I appreciate far more. I don't think it is quite a case of having more time to look at the beauty of creation, but of looking at in a different way.

My view of what is necessary has gradually changed. Many of the things I used to do because I thought I ought, I no longer feel guilty at omitting. Perhaps it would be truer to say I try not to feel guilty. I now feel free to look more carefully at, say, a way of prayer or a devotion and ask 'Does that really bring me closer to God now?' I used to want to do something because

someone else obviously found it a way towards God. Now I can't afford to waste effort. Because it suits somebody else, it does not follow that it is right for me now. For example, thirty, forty years ago I used to find much inspiration in that very Franciscan devotion 'The way of the Cross'. Now I would find it much more profitable to read the daily paper with compassion for the endless accounts of what people, other sons and daughters of God, are suffering at this moment. Well, that's all right – any way of prayer is meant to be a help towards God. If it ceases to be that, I had better leave it to others.

Other people of my age say to me, 'I can't concentrate on my prayers.' No, neither can I. For one thing, it is very difficult to find any position in which I can remain still for any length of time. That adds to the distraction. And my thoughts seem to be flitting around like moths. On the whole, I'm not much good at concentrating on anything for long. Very often the Jesus prayer, or something like it is all that is possible. Isn't that the key: ' . . . all that is possible'? I now know that very little is possible. How thankful I am to know that. For any naturally independent person, it maybe takes old age to make it so clear that I have no alternative but to rely on the God for whom all things are possible and who alone knows how he wants me to love.

When I was young, of course I rightly wanted to do great things for God. As my vocation was to be a contemplative nun, I suppose I meant I wanted to be able to pray like St Clare. Well, without that desire I should have got nowhere. I most certainly wanted to help others by my prayer - and I took it for granted that I should know I was doing so. Now I am old, I know that it is his action, not mine. I can only pray the prayer God gives me to pray - and if he does not give me any prayers, that does not really matter - he can use even that. I now view 'waste of time' differently. It is not the intrinsic value of how I am occupied that is important. It is the attitude with which I am living. Brooding on what happened yesterday or worrying about how I am going to be able to cope tomorrow, these are the wasted times. It is today I am in peace to love and serve the Lord. Every day, every minute is now of immense importance - it might well be the last one. Jean Vanier used to say that old age is the most precious time because it is the nearest to eternity. I am coming more and more to believe that and every day to thank God for giving me this moment of life.

Whether tomorrow will be spent here or in the next life, it is all one. §