Growing Old in Religious Life
Sr Bernard OSC

Growing old is part and parcel of all life - of all kinds of life, in fact, but with human life it is a process unique to each individual. Sometimes the onset of ageing is early and sometimes unbelievably late; inevitably it is closely linked with each person's genes and physical constitution, background and upbringing and - most importantly of all - one's character, which embraces psychological, philosophical and spiritual factors, and whether one's fundamental attitude to life is positive or negative. So, in the light of all this, it seems that one can only write about one's own personal experience - to do otherwise would involve judgments of all kinds and on this topic the Lord said: "Don't"! So, here we go - "Growing Old in Religious Life".

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low. (Ecclesiastes 12. 1-4)

I am supposed to be an 'old lady'?!! But when sitting in a comfortable chair I just don't feel like one; I love life and living just as much as I did at eighteen. However, necessarily, the challenges are different. My thought processes, though more penetrating and perhaps a little more circumspect, are similar to 60+ years ago. The big difference is - experience. The longer one lives, the more one realises that our youthful and not-so-youthful judgments can be shallow and erroneous. The need to have 'the mind of Christ' becomes more and more urgent. One's value system changes over the years: is it necessary to prove oneself right every single time? Is it necessary that others should always think well of us? Do we always have to reach the top? Do we have to attain every possible outward achievement? 'Living in God's house' gradually, over the years, makes our evaluation process more interior and God-centred, and so many things which seemed vitally important in those early days don't really matter any more.

"Growing Old in Religious Life" has enormous practical benefits because of living, as most religious do, in community. So meals always turn up regularly; ailments are attended to by competent sisters; prayer in and with the Community ensures that God gets his rightful space; there is always companionship and a helping hand when needed; one is never lonely or alone, and there is always a listening ear to share thoughts and ideas, worries and joys, the little pleasures of every day and the concerns of friends and family, and there is always someone to consult about the elusive crossword clue.

However, when one tries to move out of the above-mentioned comfortable chair, one has to admit one is less mobile and rather slower, there is a need to pause here and there to keep one's balance, one needs more rest, and the aches and pains make themselves felt with more insistence than in previous years. The advancing
years bring different challenges to be faced, but again, experience teaches us that it is necessary - even imperative - to live within one's limitations and to relax in them. This relaxation puts frustration to flight and, if we let it, gives us more time to be interiorly focused ... just to sit and enjoy God's beautiful creation and read his messages there, to thank him for so much our lives have brought us as gifts from himself - wonderful people we have met, and spiritual light and input we have received through various means. It is wonderful to be able to thank God with real delight and, like Our Lady, to ponder all this in one's heart. This time to ponder, to meditate and just to 'be', is even more appreciated when one's life has been largely spent in positions of leadership and administration and so filled to overflowing with things to be done, people to talk to, arrangements to be made and all the other million and one trivia of daily community life.

Even though this increased opportunity and desire give us so much more interior space for spiritual activity, there are very many gifts on the natural plane which can be an enormous help. I would give pride of place to a good sense of humour! How many difficult and awkward situations can be eased by a sense of humour? To see the funny side of one's own disabilities lightens the burden enormously and just to relax and see the silly side of life (though it has to be with someone on the same silly wave-length) relaxes the tensions of life in a wonderful way, while sharing in the fun side of community life makes age differences disappear.

Most elderly people find that their reflective moments increase, I think, and there is so much to thank God for in our life experiences. Gratitude for these somehow brings a second helping of grace, I am sure, as our ruminating upon them helps us to understand them more fully. We begin, too, to understand or to get a better grasp of, the quirks of our own personal nature and to develop strategies to be less negative and more positive about these. In my own case, sound-bites such as 'avoid arguments', 'always be kind', 'be grateful', 'never rush' are good advice, while 'selective deafness can be very useful' is absolutely true! As I said at the beginning, everyone is very different and age catches up with different people at different times and in very different ways. I thank God so very much that he has (so far!) left me my mind in good working order, which again is his gift, and I pray that I may use it to the full.

Over and above all this, of course, is the certainty and excitement of knowing that it cannot be all that long till our journey's end, when we shall see 'face to face' in a vision and fulfilment that it is impossible even to imagine now. So we must be penetrated with patience. I recall the Serenity Prayer, which I chose for my Silver Jubilee card nearly forty years ago: 'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference' - and the pendulum swings ever more surely to the first phrase of the prayer! f

Sister Bernard entered the Poor Clare Monastery in York in 1947 and was abbess there from 1966-1993; in 1996, at the invitation of Basil, Cardinal Hume, she moved to the Poor Clare community at Arkley in North London to revive an ageing and shrinking community. She successfully put Arkley back on its feet so that it is now a lively and thriving community.