

Genesee County Council on Aging

Senior Appreciation Mass
September 18, 2007

HOMILY

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St. John the Evangelist Parish
Davison, Michigan

For one thing, have you noticed that we are all aging? It's one of the hot topics in magazines and on television. The baby boomers are reaching 55 years of age. How will we safeguard social security when all these boomers arrive at retirement? It is a question that is often asked. And there is a remarkable transition taking place in society. For the first time a majority of those born today will live to the Biblical threescore and ten. For the first time, due to low birth rates, we have zero population growth in this country. And, in part because of that, since 1983, persons 65 and older outnumber teenagers. The fastest growing segment of our population, for the first time, is the 85-and-over age group. And the 35,000 Americans who today can light 100 birthday candles will triple in the next ten years. With life spread over such a span, it is not unusual to find five generations in one family. And two of them may be getting pension checks.

An amazing transition is taking place in our society, and we have observed how gracefully many people are making that transition. I read about one woman who was reaching a ripe old age and she wanted to find a comfortable retirement village to live in. She visited one place and filled out a questionnaire on her health and lifestyle. Then she wrote down her address. On the line after the word "Zip" she wrote, "Surprising amount of zip, considering my age."

I heard about a conversation a 78-year-old man had with his doctor after his physical had been completed. The doctor recommended that the man come back in six months for another check-up. The patient shook his head and said, "Doctor, I don't think I'll be around then." "Nonsense," replied the physician with a hearty, reassuring smile. "Don't say that. You'll be around

for years.” The man cleared his throat and said, “I mean, Doc, I’ll be in Florida. I go there every January.” Seventy-eight isn’t as old as it used to be. We are all aging.

There’s an old story about a man who went to a doctor for a physical examination. The examination was concluded and the doctor said, “I have good news for you. You are in perfect health. In fact, you have the health of a man half your age.” The man thanked the doctor, got up and headed for the door. When he got near the door, he collapsed and died on the spot. The doctor said to the nurse, “Let’s turn him around so it looks like he was coming in.”

Here we might recall that the Bible decrees that older people should receive special honor and courtesy because of their wisdom, experience and godliness. In biblical times, the elders sat at the gates of the various towns in positions of honor. They settled disputes and dispensed advice. They were honored for their wisdom.

In the Book of Job we read, “*Age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom.*” Many of the biblical heroes were up in age before they did great things. When Moses and Aaron first went to see Pharaoh to demand freedom for the Israelite slaves, Moses was 80 and Aaron was 83. When God announced to Abraham that he and Sarah were going to have a baby, Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90.

In the words of Psalm 37, “*I have been young and now I am old, and in all my years I have never seen the Lord forsake a person who loves him.*” Who knows that better than you? Of course, there are some trade-offs that come with aging. We give up some things, but we gain others. You can’t do everything at 70 that you could do at 30. But on the other hand, you have capacities at 70 that you didn’t have at 30. Sure, you can’t run as fast as you used to; but you can spot a phony quicker. You can’t read the fine print of a paper without your glasses; but you can read the signs of the times that a younger person will miss.

Of course, the real challenge is whether our lives are gradually becoming fashioned after that of Jesus. It is a lifelong process of growth. If we have learned purpose of life, each decade we live ought to see us become more and more like the Master. Think about when that says about our lives. What the world needs today are visible role models of faithfulness—faithful to God, faithful to the values of our faith, faithful to life itself.

Suppose every young person had the kind of grandma and the kind of grandpa who was so loving, so accepting that they knew no matter how tense things got at home, there was somebody they could talk to. Why? Because they knew that grandma or grandpa was like Jesus.

The other day a lady called me. She was pregnant and she wanted to know if I thought it was a mistake to bring a little baby into a world as troubled as this one is. And I replied that what made being alive almost worthwhile was the faith-filled and beautiful people I have met. People like you, people who are so filled with love and devotion and faithfulness.

But lest anyone get the impression that our work is done, no matter how old we are, we mustn't stop growing as long as we live. President Harry Truman once visited Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes when Holmes was in his late nineties. He found the retired Justice reading *Plato's Republic*. Truman said, "Justice Holmes, why, at this point in life, would you be reading something as deep as that?" Holmes replied, "I may be old, but I haven't stopped growing." One of the best ways to keep growing is to render service to others. Our church needs you more than ever.

In closing, I'd like to leave you with the words of John Cardinal Newman.

"God has created me to do for Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission...I am a link in a chain, a connection between people. God has not created me for nothing. I shall do good; I shall do His work; I shall be a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling."