

ON SELLING THE CHALICES

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Recently I received a very touching letter from a priest. He thanked me for writing frequently on the *missionary* nature of the Congregation and encouraged me to keep urging the confreres to renew this spirit among us. But he told me, with great simplicity, that this creates a problem for him personally. To illustrate the problem, he cited an article that I recently wrote.¹ In describing the flexibility needed of a missionary I stated: "This means that the members of the Congregation will be agile, quick to move when needs arise." But what about the elderly? This confrere, who senses his own lessened energies and sees himself as "retiring" little by little from much of what he was formerly able to do (though, actually, he remains quite active!), encouraged me to write something on a "Vincentian spirituality for the aging." Using the data base that he had at his fingertips, he reminded me that 17.1% of the bishops, priests, and brothers of the Congregation are 75 years of age or more.²

I liked this letter very much. It moved me to examine St. Vincent's writings from a very different point of view and to reflect in prayer about those confreres who have given so much for so long and are now experiencing declining energies.

I offer the following thoughts as a response to this generous confrere. I hope that he, with others, might find them helpful.

I. St. Vincent's thoughts on our aging members

1. The aging are to be loved and treasured.

St. Vincent showed great concern that sick and aging members would be treated well. He tells the Daughters of Charity that it would be a great injustice not to do so.³ He urges the aging not to be discouraged when they cannot do everything that the other members are capable of doing. "The Company is a mother," he tells them, "who knows well how to distinguish among those of her children who are sick and those who are well."⁴ Just as a mother treats her sick child with tenderness and compassion, so also should the Company act toward the sick and aging.

¹"On Being a Missionary," *Vincentiana*, XXXVIII (1994) 319.

²About 21% of the Daughters of Charity are also 75 years old or more.

³SV X, 375.

⁴SV X, 375.

The Company should so treasure its aging members that it will be willing to make significant sacrifices in order to care for them lovingly. "I would be delighted," St. Vincent writes to Pierre Du Chesne, "if word were sent to me from somewhere that someone in the Company had sold chalices for that purpose."⁵ He writes that nothing should be spared in order to care for the sick well.⁶ The sick are, in fact, a blessing for the Company.⁷

2. *The elderly owe the young an ongoing, deepening witness to fidelity and holiness, living out the rule of the Company and keeping alive its missionary spirit.*

It is surprising how often St. Vincent returns to this theme, particularly in his later years. He states that old age should not impede us from living out the spirit of the Congregation and from doing zealously what our limited physical energies allow us to do.

St. Vincent felt that the elderly owe it to the Company to live out the main lines of its rule as long as they can. He was particularly insistent that they take part in the spiritual exercises of the community.⁸

He speaks very forcefully to aging sisters who give bad example to the young. He tells them that, because they have been in the Company from the beginning, they are obliged to greater perfection:

*O senior sisters, o senior sisters, what do you do when your actions give the lie to your seniority? What will you say to God when he demands an account of all your thoughts, words and actions, and especially of those that have disedified new-comers? And I, wretched I, what shall I have to say for having given scandal to the younger sisters. You should know that seniority is reckoned not by the number of years but by virtue.*⁹

He repeats this theme very frequently in his conferences both to the sisters and to the members of the Congregation of the Mission.¹⁰

He also encouraged them to keep the fire of zeal burning within them.¹¹ He wanted the elderly, including himself, to stir up the flame of apostolic missionary love within themselves, even to death.

⁵SV I, 531; cf. also the conference of December 5, 1659, "We should sell the church's chalices to take care of them!". SV XII, 410.

⁶SV VI, 372.

⁷SV VII, 179.

⁸SV V, 622.

⁹SV X, 90.

¹⁰Cf. SV VII, 168; X 29, 46-48, 78, 90, 115, 283, 371; XI 80, 207; XIII 729.

¹¹SV XI, 135.

Even in his old age St. Vincent himself was filled with a missionary spirit. In one of his most famous discourses he tells the members of the Congregation:¹²

As for myself, in spite of my age, I say before God that I do not feel exempt from the obligation of laboring for the salvation of those poor people, for what could hinder me from doing so? If I cannot preach every day, all right! I will preach twice a week; if I cannot preach more important sermons, I will strive to preach less important ones; and if the people do not hear me, then what is there to prevent me from speaking in a friendly, homely way to those poor folk, as I am now speaking to you, gathering them around me as you are now?

He hopes that the elderly will arrive at genuine freedom. He tells the members of the Congregation of the Mission, that there are old sick confreres who have asked to be sent to the foreign missions in spite of serious illness. These are people who are truly free, he comments.¹³

Basically, he wants the members of his Company to die in battle rather than in repose. "It does not matter whether we die sooner or later, provided that we die with arms in our hands."¹⁴

I myself, old and infirm as I am, should not cease to be disposed, yes, even to set out for the Indies to win souls to God, even though I were to die on the way, or on board ship. For, what do you think God asks of us? A body? O, not at all. What then? Our good will, a genuinely good will to seize every opportunity to serve him, even at the risk of our lives.¹⁵

3. *The sick and elderly are a "theater of patience."*

The elderly have much to teach us. They invite us, as it were, to a theater of patience¹⁶ where we, the spectators, can see how suffering is to be borne. In them we see the cross lived out. We see faith tried in the fire, as it struggles with the ultimate human mystery, the inevitable reality of death.

He writes to a priest of the Mission:¹⁷

¹²SV XI, 136.

¹³SV XII, 241.

¹⁴SV XI, 413.

¹⁵SV XI, 402.

¹⁶SV XI, 73.

¹⁷SV II, 571.

It is true that illness, far better than health, makes us see what we are, and it is in the midst of sufferings that impatience and melancholy attack even the most resolute. But since they do damage only to the very weak, you have profited from them rather than their doing you any harm, because Our Lord has strengthened you in the practice of His good pleasure, and this strength is apparent in your determination to combat them courageously. I hope also that this will be even more clearly apparent in the victories you will win by suffering henceforth for the love of God, not only with patience but also with joy and cheerfulness.

He tells the Daughters of Charity that, ultimately, patience, tried by suffering, is the virtue of the perfect.¹⁸ In that sense, Vincent states, inevitable illness should be accepted as a "divine state."¹⁹

4. *In sickness and in dying the true depths of the person are revealed.*

It is easy to witness to Christ in joyous times when spirits run high, when apostolic energies are abundant, when prayer is consoling, when the presence of one's brothers and sisters in community is strengthening. But faith, and the depths of the human person, are severely tried when, in sickness and in dying, these consolations are often lacking. Death is the ultimate human mystery. Before it we are stripped naked. It is in the dying process that we must abandon ourselves into the hands of the living God.

No state can be found more suitable for practicing virtue. Faith is exercised marvelously in illness. Hope shines resplendently. Resignation, the love of God, and all virtues find ample matter for their exercise in illness. It is when we are ill that we know what burdens we bear and what we really are. It is the probe by which you may most assuredly test and discover the virtue of any individual, whether he has much or little or none at all. One never sees more clearly what a man really is than when he is in the infirmary. Illness is the surest test for unveiling the most virtuous and the least virtuous.²⁰

II. St. Vincent's own aging process²¹

¹⁸SV X, 181; cf. also, SV XV (Mission et Charité) 109.

¹⁹SV I, 144.

²⁰SV XI, 72.

²¹Cf. Dodin, André, *Monsieur Vincent parle à ceux qui souffrent* (Desclée De Brouwer: Paris, 1981); "Vicente de Paúl y los enfermos" in *Vicente de Paúl y los Enfermos* (CEME, Salamanca, 1978) 25-52.

St. Vincent lived 30 years beyond the median age of his contemporaries. Given that fact, one might presume that he had a rather robust constitution, even though we know from his own statements that he suffered from a variety of illnesses.²² Struck by an arrow at the age of 25, he would feel its effects for the rest of his life.²³

He frequently suffered from fevers and a type of malaria, which he called his "little fever,"²⁴ and for which Louise de Marillac tenderly described many remedies.²⁵

As early as 1615, his legs began to give him trouble.²⁶ By 1632, he had to buy a horse in order to travel from St. Lazare into Paris each day.²⁷ In 1633, a horse fell beneath him and then on top of him.²⁸ However, he was tireless and, in an age when transportation was limited, was capable of covering hundreds of miles in very little time. In the first half of 1649, when he was almost 70 years of age, he traveled by horse through 600 km of western France.

But by June of 1649 he could no longer mount the horse, so, with considerable embarrassment, he began to use the carriage that the Duchess of Aiguillon gave him.²⁹ He also had been kicked by a horse in 1631, thrown from one in 1633,³⁰ and fell into the Loire at Durtal in 1649.³¹ That same year, he just missed being assassinated.³² The swelling in his legs reached his knees in 1655, so that he could no longer genuflect³³ and had to take to using a cane.³⁴ He had a serious carriage accident in 1658.³⁵ That same year, the ulcers in his right leg produced a gaping wound on the ankle.³⁶ He also experienced considerable difficulty with one of his eyes.³⁷ From 1659 on, he was not longer able to leave St. Lazare and within a few months he had to remain upstairs and celebrate Mass in the infirmary.³⁸ Soon after that, he could no longer celebrate by himself and had to use crutches to move

²²Likewise, Louise de Marillac lived well beyond the median age of the time, though St. Vincent himself makes it clear that she looked half dead for the last 23 years of her life! Cf. SV III, 256.

²³SV I, 4.

²⁴SV I, 70, 110, 196, 237, etc.

²⁵SV I, 581, 587, 597.

²⁶Abelly, Book I, 247; Collet, P., *La vie de saint Vincent de Paul*, Nancy, 1748, I, 46.

²⁷Abelly, Book I, 247.

²⁸SV I, 198.

²⁹Abelly, Book I, 247; cf. Collet, *op. cit.*, I, 477.

³⁰SV I, 110, 198-9.

³¹Abelly, Book III, 267; Collet, *op. cit.*, I, 474; SV III, 424.

³²Abelly, Book III, 21.

³³SV XI, 207.

³⁴Abelly, Book I, 247.

³⁵SV VII, 58, 60.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷SV VIII, 23.

³⁸*Ibid.*

around.³⁹ Six weeks before his death, these became useless to him and he had to accept assisting at Mass from a chair.⁴⁰

As early as 1644, serious illnesses began their offensive; these succeeded in keeping him in bed for periods of eight to ten days.⁴¹ They repeated their assaults in 1649, 1651, 1652, and 1655.⁴²

To all these maladies were added, in 1659, further problems caused by kidney stones and retention of urine. To move he had to use a rope which had been tied to a joist in his room.

St. Vincent also had the painful experience, in his declining years, of seeing his closest friends die. He was able to be present at the deathbed of Jean-Jacques Olier, who went to the Lord on Easter Sunday in 1657. "The earth possesses his body, the heavens his soul, but his spirit remains with you," St. Vincent told Olier's followers that day.⁴³ On December 31, 1659 Alain de Solminihac, his great friend and fellow reformer of the clergy, also died. The final year of St. Vincent's life, 1660, was marked by the death of three of his closest companions. Monsieur Portail, friend and collaborator for almost 50 years, died on February 14. On the morning of March 15 Louise de Marillac went to the Lord. "You have in heaven a mother who has much influence," he told the Daughters of Charity.⁴⁴ On May 3 Louis de Chandénier, for whom St. Vincent had the greatest admiration and affection, also died. Vincent burst into tears on hearing the news.

All of these deaths touched the saint deeply.⁴⁵ Even as early as January 1659 he began to say goodbye to his friends. In a letter written at that time, after begging pardon for his faults, he told the former General of the Galleys, Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, that he would pray for him in this world and in the next.⁴⁶

III. Horizon shifts between the time of St. Vincent and ours

1. *We expect to live longer.*

³⁹*Ibid.*, 247-8.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 248.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 245; SV II, 481; Collet, *op. cit.*, I, 406.

⁴²Collet, *ibid.*, I, 477; SV IV, 532; V, 350.

⁴³SV XIII, 166.

⁴⁴SV X, 717.

⁴⁵Cf. Román, José María, *San Vicente de Paúl, I* (Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos: Madrid, 1981) 659-69.

⁴⁶SV VII, 435-436.

The statistics vary from country to country, but at present in St. Vincent's own country, men, on the average, live 23 years longer than they did in his time and women live 27 years longer. The average life-span of religious is, I suspect, even longer. When I receive the death notices of Daughters of Charity I am continually struck by how many die in their 80's and 90's. While most of us in Europe and the United States expect to, and actually do, live to a ripe old age, such long life-expectancy was not at all the case in St. Vincent's time.

In some other parts of the world, however, the median age of those who die is still comparable with that in France in 1660. It is therefore clear that this horizon shift applies only in certain countries.

2. There is a tendency, in contemporary society, to flee the reality of death.

Of course, in the practical order, it is impossible to ignore mortality; we all die. Contemporary health care, however, is often organized in such a way as to imply the rejection of death's inevitable reality. The symptoms are abundantly evident, particularly in the so-called "developed" countries. Because of fear of malpractice suits and other litigation, doctors often keep patients on artificial life-support systems long beyond what is reasonable. Huge resources go into sustaining life in its final moments. In the United States, for example, over the last 15 years, 30% of all Medicaid money has gone to patients with less than a year to live.⁴⁷

This phenomenon too, like increased life expectancy, is limited to certain countries, since it often flows from cultural biases, the existence of significant financial resources, and litigious tendencies within societies.

But death is not the ultimate enemy. While at times we must use abundant resources and human creativity to stave it off, there are other times when we should accept its inevitable advent. The Catholic moral tradition has consistently spoken of the need to use "ordinary means" to combat illness, but it has also, in its long history, recognized that there are times when the use of "extraordinary means" causes disproportionate burdens for patients and those who love them. The artificial prolongation of life is often the painful prolongation of dying.

3. The culture of youth.

Linked with the contemporary tendency to deny the reality of death is a tendency to prolong and glorify youth. There is, of course, a bright side to being and remaining young. The strength and charm of youth, Pope Paul VI said at the end of Vatican II, is "the ability to rejoice with what is beginning, to give oneself

⁴⁷Richard McCormick, "The Catholic Hospital Today: Mission Impossible?" *Origins* 24 (No. 39; March 13, 1995) 651-652.

unreservedly, to renew oneself, and to set out again for new conquests."⁴⁸ But the shadow side of this tendency is a fixation on the body, an overemphasis on physical beauty, and a failure to accept the aging process, with a resultant immaturity. Newspapers, magazines, television and films fill our eyes with the beauty and vitality of youth, and then often attempt to sell us the products that will keep us perennially young!

4. *Medical advances have made sickness and dying, at least at times, less painful.*

In modern times, science has produced remarkable painkillers, from aspirins to total anesthesia. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, physicians can ease pain as never before. New drugs can significantly alleviate the sufferings of the sick and the dying, even if at times they have other notable side-effects, like the dimming of consciousness. At times these side-effects are so potent, that it is hard to distinguish the boundary between easing pain and hastening death.

But it is important not to exaggerate this horizon shift. Pain still looms large in the lives of the sick. Even with all the modern medical advances, in the United States for instance, there are more than 36,000,000 people suffering from arthritic pain, 70,000,000 from wrenching back pain, and 20,000,000 from migraines. In other words, about one-third of the population suffers recurrent chronic pain.⁴⁹ The situation is surely worse in many other countries where fewer medical resources are available.

IV. SOME REFLECTIONS ON AGING TODAY

*To grow old is to possess all life's stages.
To grow old is to see God close up.*⁵⁰

Aging, like every stage of human development, is ambiguous. It can be the occasion for growth or for retrogression. I have heard younger confreres, as spectators in what St. Vincent called the "theater" of the elderly, comment on both phenomena: "That's the way I'd like to grow old," some have whispered with a certain awe; on the other hand, with great sadness, some have lamented: "I hope I never become a bitter old man like that."

We all hope, of course, to grow old gracefully. Once, upon hearing the news of the death of a wonderful missionary who had served in China, suffered imprisonment and exile, and then lived among us cheerfully and peacefully for twenty years, a friend

⁴⁸Closing Message of Vatican II, AAS, 58 (1966) 18.

⁴⁹Richard McCormick, *The Critical Calling* (Georgetown University Press: Washington, DC, 1989) 363-64.

⁵⁰Jean Guittou, in the preface to Renée de Tryon-Montalembert, *L'Autunno È La Mia Primavera* (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 1990) 7.

of mine turned to me and said: "All I want to do is clap. It's like the end of a masterpiece." In fact, I have had the privilege of knowing a number of wonderful elderly confreres during my life in the community.

In a lovely talk to the elderly sisters of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, Mother Lucie Rogé described the characteristics that she saw in faithful elderly sisters:

- a peaceful serenity,
- deep charity,
- a profound confidence that expresses itself in joy,
- efforts at ongoing conversion that witness to a desire to live God's life deeply,
- constant prayer.⁵¹

I offer the following brief reflections with the hope of encouraging confreres and Daughters of Charity as they work through the aging process. No one is ever too old, as St. Richard of Chichester once wrote, "To know God more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly."⁵²

1. *All of us grow old. There is no sense denying it.*

Walt Whitman once wrote:

*Youth, large, lusty, loving --- Youth
full of grace, force, fascination,
Do you know that Old Age may come after you?*⁵³

Today we know that preventive health care is very important. The huge decline in deaths from coronary heart disease over the last 25 years has come largely from improved eating habits (like the reduction in cholesterol) and the decline in cigarette smoking. It is also evident that regular exercise, weight control, and a balanced diet contribute significantly to maintaining our youth!

Nonetheless, we all grow old. Christian realism should move us to face that fact squarely. The Superior General, for example, should recognize that, more than likely, he will be dead 25 years from now, if not sooner.

In a letter written to his friends on November 29, 1366, the great Italian author, Petrarch wrote, "I have grown old. I can no longer hide the fact if I would, and I would not if I could.... And I say to any who may follow me with reluctant steps:

⁵¹Miguel Pérez Flores, C.M., "Potencial humano de las Provincias de las Hijas de la Caridad en España a partir de los 65 años para seguir viviendo ilusionadamente el Carisma Vicenciano" in *La Respuesta Exige Un Exodo* (CEME: Salamanca, 1993) 91.

⁵²Prayer attributed to Richard of Chichester, 1197-1253.

⁵³Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* ("Youth, Day, Old Age and Night") in James E. Miller, ed., *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1959) 165.

“Come with assurance; fear not.... Age, toward which you draw amid the storms of life, is nothing so dreadful. Those who call it so have found all stages of life unwelcome, thanks to their mishandling of life, not to a particular age. The latter years of a learned, modest man are sheltered and serene. He has appeased the storms within his breast, he has left behind the reefs of strife and labor, he is protected as by a ring of sunny hills from the outer storms. So go securely, do not delay; a harbor opens where you feared a shipwreck.”⁵⁴

2. *The evangelical challenge, as we grow old, is to grow in love.*

Hardly anything could be clearer from the New Testament. Growth in love is the perennial challenge in every age of the human person. Graceful aging, if it is truly to be grace-filled, is growth in the charity of Christ. In community, this means warmth and gentleness towards one's brothers and sisters, whether young or old. "For what is charity," St. Vincent tells us, "but love and gentleness."⁵⁵ In an apostolic context, this means ongoing zeal, even as one's energies are reduced and one's ability to "contribute" is lessened.

Unfortunately, at times our self-esteem is so tied into "works," that we become bitter when our capacity for working is diminished. It is crucial, as we begin to experience this temptation, to redimension our service to the poor and to the community. The elderly have many gifts, though they are not precisely the same gifts as those of youth. It is vital, for those who wish to grow old gracefully, to discover those gifts and to share them generously.⁵⁶

3. *It is important to maintain "a young heart."*

Cicero once wrote:

*I like a young person in whom there is something of the old. So also do I like an old person in whom there is something of the young. Someone who follows this maxim will perhaps be old in body, but he will never be old in mind.*⁵⁷

We often describe the qualities of youth as enthusiasm, imagination, the ability to change. But these characteristics are by no means exclusive to the young. One of the most enthusiastic missionaries I ever met was an 80 year-old confrere with whom I spent several days in Nigeria. Two of the most creative councillors whom I ever met

⁵⁴Petrarch, a letter to his friends, written from Pavia, November 29, 1366 or 1367.

⁵⁵SV IX, 267.

⁵⁶Miguel Pérez Flores, C.M., "Potencial humano de las Provincias de las Hijas de la Caridad en España a partir de los 65 años para seguir viviendo ilusionadamente el Carisma Vicenciano" in *La Respuesta Exige Un Exodo* (CEME: Salamanca, 1993) 81-100.

⁵⁷Cicero, *De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione*. Translated by W. A. Falconer (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979) 47.

were wise, experienced men who were well into their seventies, who could envision solutions to problems that few others could formulate. And, in regard to the ability to change, I have seen priests and sisters launch into new careers when they were already "retired," and I have seen them serve even more joyfully and creatively than ever before. Such people pass on a wonderful legacy to those who follow. D. H. Lawrence once wrote:

*When the ripe fruit falls
its sweetness distils and trickles away into the veins of the earth.*

*When fulfilled people die
the essential oil of their experience enters
the veins of living space, and adds a glister
to the atom, to the body of immortal chaos.*

*For space is alive
and it stirs like a swan
whose feathers glister
silky with oil of distilled experience.⁵⁸*

4. Aging is an opportunity to develop the contemplative dimension of the human person.

We can "do" less as our physical energies diminish, but we can surely develop other dimensions of our humanity. Of special importance among these, particularly for those who "give themselves to God in the service of the poor,"⁵⁹ is the contemplative dimension of our existence. While at earlier stages in life we might find ourselves putting the emphasis on the second part of St. Vincent's oft-repeated phrase: To give ourselves to God *in the service of the poor*, in our declining years, the emphasis can very profitably fall more and more on the first part of the phrase: *To give ourselves to God* in the service of the poor.

In every era of our lives, it is important to use time well. Old age is no exception. One of its temptations is to fritter time away in excessive personal concern over one's health. On the other hand, one of the graces of aging is the gift of time in which one might seek the Lord more freely and concentratedly. The challenge for the elderly is to convert heavy hours of loneliness into peaceful moments of solitude with God and contemplation of his goodness. The elderly have time to read and ponder the Scriptures and to listen to the word of God in a new way. They have the opportunity to cry out with the psalmist: "I will sing of the loving kindness of God forever!"⁶⁰ The American poet, Archibald MacLeish once put it this way:

⁵⁸D. H. Lawrence, "When the Ripe Fruit Falls," 1929.

⁵⁹Cf. SV I, 185; II, 64; III, 149; IV, 15, 67, 117, 126, 138, 156, 233, 280, 361, 577, 596; V 83, 107, 233, 326, 425, 584, 634; VII 13, 38, 369; IX 13, 26, 29, 221; *Entretiens* (1960) 37, 471, 550, 562, 569, 571, 583, 586, 742, 743, 775, 776, 811, 825, 831, 835, 888, 916, 944.

⁶⁰Ps 88:2.

*Now at sixty what I see,
Although the world is worse by far,
Stops my heart in ecstasy.
God, the wonders that there are!⁶¹*

5. *Old age is a time for reconciliation with the past.*

We all bear our scars and sins into the present. We need healing. Old age is a wonderful opportunity for reconciliation. It is a time when memories can be healed, even bitter ones: of flawed relationships with our parents, of failures in the course of our lives, of rejection, of personal sin. In dying, all of these must be placed in the hands of a loving, merciful God. It is surely helpful if this process begins long before the proximate approach of death. The sacrament of reconciliation and conversation with a genuine "soul friend" can provide wonderful opportunities for healing the sins and open wounds of the past. Likewise, the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, celebrated with faith, in company with one's brothers and sisters, can lead to the integral healing and peace that is the goal of on-going conversion.

6. *Loneliness is one of the particular challenges of aging.*

As the existentialists remind us, loneliness is part of the ongoing challenge of human existence. From the time of our sudden separation from the warmth of the womb to the time of our final separation from the family of the living, young and old, single and married experience it. It has its special twists in adolescence, in mid-life, and in the declining years. Widows and widowers experience it painfully. Celibates too taste its bitterness in their own special way.

The aging will inevitably feel deeply, as St. Vincent did, the death of their friends. It stings terribly and adds poignantly to feelings of loneliness.

Our own dying is the ultimate experience of loneliness. We face separation from all those whom we have known and loved and who have given us their affection and company throughout the years. We are called, in faith, to rest in the arms of the living God. Death is the ultimate act of faith. In it, Jesus calls us to say with him: "Father into your hands I commend my spirit."⁶²

7. *We do not die alone.*

⁶¹Archibald MacLeish, "With Age Wisdom," 1952.

⁶²Lk 23:46.

From the time of baptism we profess this brief, clear article of faith: "We believe...in the communion of saints." Hopefully we experience, in our aging and in the dying process, that we are surrounded by those who love us within the Community. It helps to know also that many of those who have "gone before us with the sign of faith" await us in the heavenly banquet.

I remember, a number of years ago, walking around our major seminary property with Brother Laurence Masterson. He wanted to speak that night about what heaven was like. I recall vividly how much we talked about the "banquet" image in the New Testament. We envisioned being there rejoicing in the Lord, and laughing, eating, and drinking with many of the friends whom we had known and loved in life. Shortly after that, Brother Laurence died unexpectedly. I have always thought of him since then, smiling at the banquet table, holding a seat in waiting for us, his friends.

8. *Fundamentally we respond to death from within the Paschal Mystery of Jesus.*

Jesus' death provides the model for his followers, it is the source of strength for entering into the dying process as he did. St. Vincent was very well aware of this. "Remember Father," he writes to Monsieur Portail, "that we live in Jesus Christ by the death of Jesus Christ and that we are to die in Jesus Christ by the life of Jesus Christ and that our life ought to be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ and that in order to die like Jesus Christ it is necessary to live like Jesus Christ."⁶³ The gospel narratives of Jesus' dying call his followers to entrust themselves to the power and providence of God, to forgive those who have injured them, to place their loved ones in the hands of others, to believe that God can raise the dead to life.

In sickness and old age, a renewed, deepened understanding of our Eucharistic participation in the death and resurrection of the Lord can lead us to a deeper immersion in the Paschal Mystery, as we grow in gratitude for God's faithful love and as we enter into the dying of the Lord as the source of his risen life.

I hope that these reflections are helpful to my aging brothers and sisters, who have contributed so much to my own life and to that of the poor. In an era that at times overemphasizes the need to stay young, I am reminded of Harriet Beecher Stowe's lovely description of Rachel Halliday, written more than a century ago:

Her face was round and rosy, with a healthful downy softness, suggestive of a ripe peach. Her hair, partially silvered by age, was parted smoothly back from a high placid forehead, on which time had written no inscription, except peace on earth, good will to men, and beneath shone a large pair of clear, honest, loving brown eyes; you only needed to look straight into them, to feel that you saw to the bottom of a

⁶³SV I, 295.

*heart as good and true as ever throbbed in woman's bosom. So much has been said and sung of beautiful young girls, why don't somebody wake up to the beauty of old women?*⁶⁴

⁶⁴Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852 (E. F. Dutton & Co.: New York, 1955) 138-139.