



Engaging Aging

On the Wings of Eagles: Reflections on Retirement and Continuing Mission

By Brother Stephen Glodek, SM

While serving as Provincial of the Marianist Province of the United States, I wrote a letter to our members concerning retirement as a Marianist religious. It was a follow up to an earlier conversation we'd been having regarding the transitions our brothers were facing as they moved from active community to assisted living. I've adapted my letter slightly to share with you some reflections on how religious might better come to understand retirement not as an end to ministry, but as a re-definition of their participation in the mission of their communities. I believe that this phenomenon of rising median ages is to be lived not just by our seniors, but by entire communities.

Retirement is a rich age, when one begins to be valued more for who one has become and less for what one has done. As religious, we regard this period of life as an opportunity for members to use their gifts of love and wisdom, to deepen their prayer life, to integrate the past with the present, and to experience new freedom and peace. Practically, it is also a time to lessen responsibilities, to pursue new roles, to develop broader relationships, to enjoy leisure and to serve as a model to the younger members. As religious communities, we need to help each other recognize that each individual member is a unique blend of integration, accumulated wisdom, various needs, many experiences and personal history. We must, therefore, recognize and respect individual differences and gifts regardless of the limita-

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“Almost anything you do will be insignificant, but it is still very important that you do it.”

Mahatma Gandhi

Brother Stephen Glodek, SM, is a member of the Marianist Province of the United States. Following initial ministry in education, he spent seventeen years in province leadership in his former New York province, then eight years as the first provincial of the four provinces that merged in 2002. Brother Stephen served as president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, and as chair of the Board of Trustees of the Center for the Study of Religious Life in Chicago, IL. After his time in leadership he became the director of the Marianist Province Office of Formation for Mission. He currently serves as the director of the Tending the Vineyard project for the National Religious Retirement Office.



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tions that may be imposed by age or declining health.

As our members age, they may choose to withdraw from active scheduled ministries and serve in less demanding ways. They may choose to carry out new ministries that are consistent with new capabilities and interests. They may select a ministry of prayer, service within the community, or new avenues of sharing their wisdom and life experiences with others. At this stage in the life of elders, the entire community and others are enriched by the senior members' examples of acceptance of limitations, the virtues of relinquishment, dependency and presence, and response to God's call.

Always Missionaries

The key to blessed senior years, in my experience of our older members, is taking the time and energy to *redefine one's life as a religious*. One does not take a vacation from religious life when one retires. One simply realigns priorities according to energy levels and health. This redefinition is often difficult for seniors who have been formed to understand personal worth in terms of productivity. Among the Marianists, the old adage of "dying with chalk dust on one's coat," is still operative in many of our seniors' approach to the question of retirement. But in fact, the options are not "all or nothing"; but rather, the option for retirement is more often a new middle ground of participation in the mission tempered by the challenges that may come with rising age and health concerns. What is often lacking in this process of transition is not good will, desire, or even energy, but the critical creativity necessary to redefine one's involvement in the mission. This is where the community can make a difference. I suggest that it is an essential strategic point of concern for our collective futures that we collaborate to stimulate and facilitate creative options for and with our senior members regarding retirement.



Senior Servite friars are encouraged to stay active by participating in ministry as they are able and by pursuing hobbies and interests. *Above:* Brother Robert Fandel enjoys his time in the wood shop.

Creativity in Senior Ministry

When we talk about *redefining our participation in the mission of the community*, we are talking about using the skills that we have used for the past number of years in new ways. If I have been a good math teacher, then I will probably be a very fine math tutor. The one-on-one opportunity to influence education is merely a redirection of my talents when the grind of five classes a day becomes a bit too much. If I have taught English well, then perhaps I need to look out into the neighborhood to new populations that might greatly benefit from the patient explanation of grammar and vocabulary that I have honed for many years. If I have been a successful minister of the sacraments for many years, perhaps the hospitalized, the imprisoned, or new immigrants could benefit from my priestly ministry in new and exciting ways.

Some of our members are excellent at making these kinds of transitions. But some are not. How can we tap the insights and understandings of those we all point to as successfully retired? As we all will face the changes eventually, how can we learn from those

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skilled in living through transitions? Often, teaching and learning happen best when “outsiders” are involved. We sit attentively when speakers come to present their programs. But when our own members rise up, we can too easily turn the other way, caught in old patterns of judgement from history long past. Instead, we need to approach our lives together with a newfound humility: for some, a humility to serve as mentors to other members: for some a humility to be mentored in new ways of participating in mission.

Supporting the Mission until Death

A distinction between mission and ministry is a critical shift in consciousness for some of our senior members. For example, the mission of the Marianist Province of the United States is to educate both individuals and communities in faith with special care for the young and the poor. This mission is lived out in a wide variety of specific ministries and institutions sponsored by the Province. But I am a part of the *mission* of the Society of Mary and the Province until I die. I am a part of the *ministries* of the Province according to my professional education for the length of time God gives me health and energy.

We belong to our communities for all the days of our lives.

This belonging is in no way conditional to our doing. How we respond to the great grace of our belonging will change over time due to age

and health. The ability to do less should never result in religious feeling that they belong less! In a society obsessed with productivity and consumerism, our lives in religious communities stand in strong counter-cultural witness through the care and value we afford each of our members all the days of their lives.

Advancing Years...Advancing Holiness

When the time comes that we are unable to do even a revised schedule of involvement, we are still



Funeral Liturgy being celebrated in the Motherhouse Chapel of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Baden, PA



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members, still religious, and we participate ever more deeply in our mission by the prayer and suffering that accompanies the increasing incapacities of old age among us. I am consistently moved by my visits to our health centers of the Province. Brothers tell me that there isn't much they can do these days except to pray for me and the Province! I wonder when we will realize that this "not much" is perhaps the deepest and most efficacious participation in Mary's mission that we can afford each other.



Benedictine Monks of Subiaco Abbey in Subiaco, Arkansas.

The spiritual journey is not finished until we rest in the embrace of God. If God blesses us with senior years, it provides a unique opportunity for particular attention to the journey of deepening our spiritual lives and reflecting on our vocation. Perhaps these years could be the occasion of memoir-writing: what have I learned on my particular journey in religious life? The world hungers for spiritual testimony. While *what you have done* is certainly worthy and exemplary, *what you have learned about God* will be an even more efficacious testament to the young. In writing, spiritual direction, and in conversation, I urge seniors to buoy up the spiritual journey of the community by sharing what they have learned and experienced of our God, of discipleship of Jesus Christ, and of their particular understanding of the mission we serve together.

Keeping the Whole Thing Going

Religious communities have often defined themselves by the mission of their institutions rather than by the mission of their members. For years, communities will keep any number of ministries afloat by calling and recalling on the leadership and energies of their members long after "retirement" would seem appropriate for those members. Most of them have

responded with extraordinary generosity. But that generosity has cost those members dearly by underscoring, even unconsciously, their worth with their productivity. As a Marianist Province, we have tried to amend this view of ministry among our members and our leadership. We have spent energy and time in developing what will be a strategic plan for the future. More importantly, we have made a priority Province commitment to "aging with grace."

I suggest that the "whole thing," will continue long after we are laid to rest because the "whole thing" is the mission entrusted to our religious communities by God through specific charism of our founders. It is infinitely larger than a school or a parish or a particular apostolic project. It is about my life and our lives lived for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity, the honor of Mary and to follow Christ more closely in his saving mission. That's the big picture into which all the little competencies, or lack thereof, in our individual lives fit.

When I became Assistant Provincial of the Province of New York many years ago, one of the brothers older than myself gave me a saying by Mahatma

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Gandhi that still sits on the wall over my desk, even though that desk and that wall have changed several times: “Almost anything you do will be insignificant, but it is still very important that you do it.”

This seeming paradox is at the heart of our understanding that our participation in the mission extends from profession until death in various and sundry ways at different points in our lives.

Conclusion

Sister Tierney Trueman, OSF of Rochester Minnesota relates the following story:

“The eagle possesses the greatest longevity of its species. It lives for 70 years. To arrive at this age, at 40 it must make a decision. At 40, its pointed beak curves inward; its claws curve inward and become soft. It cannot grab prey needed for food. Its wings are heavy with its thick feathers. To fly is difficult. It has two alternatives: die or face a painful process which consists in flying to a high mountain near a wall. The eagle begins to peck the wall with its beak until it wears off. Then it must wait for a new beak to grow, with which it begins to pull out the old claws. With its new claws, it pulls out the old feathers. Free

of the weight of the past, it catches the trade winds and begins to live again.”

Those of us privileged to spend time with our most alive seniors know the stories of how they have changed their visage and have had the courage to let go of the weight of the past. Despite sometimes enfeebled bodies, they soar among us! Our senior members are marvelous witnesses to us of adaptability and renewal. Their positive attitude toward the future has provided younger members with so many positive models of aging with grace and creative participation in the mission of the Province.

But beyond being a model to younger members, the senior members participating in the mission of our communities provide a critical opportunity for all of us. As we imagine and try to structure our futures, we need to look in a strategic way at the insights and experiences they bring to this issue of retirement. In challenging times, they call us to hope in the future. We need to find ways to mutually help each other as we collectively approach the transitions of senior years. Only together, can we grow into our future energetically and creatively, redefining our participation in and expression of mission.



It is my sincere hope that these few remarks will stimulate conversation among you as you take up this important topic of retirement and lifelong commitment to mission.

Order of Friar Servants of Mary (Servites) sharing breakfast together. *Clockwise from left:* Brother Robert Fandel, Mr. Zoilo Ruiz, Father Michael Gantley, Brother Sebastian Mulu, Brother Joseph Fundak, and Brother Leo Hambur.

Photos on pages 2, 4 and 5 are by Jim Judkis/
Judkisphoto@comcast.net

Resources

BOOKS and ARTICLES

Gittins, A. (2002). *A Presence that Disturbs: A Call to Radical Discipleship*. Missouri: Liguori Publications.

Joint CMSM/LCWR Task Force on Health Care for Religious., Conference of Major Superiors of Men., & Leadership Conference of Women Religious of the United States. (1995). *A vision of life, health, sickness, and death for religious: A reflection paper*. Silver Spring, Md: CMSM/LCWR

Rohr, R. (2011). *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. California: Jossey-Bass.

Van Breeman, P. (2005). *Summoned at Every Age: Finding God in Our Later Years*. Indiana: Ave Maria Press.

Weber, R. and Osborn, C. (2015). *The Spirituality of Age: A Seekers Guide to Growing Older*. Vermont: Park Street Press.

WEBSITES

The Cistercian monks of Mepkin Abbey, located in Moncks Corner, South Carolina, have created a page on their website dedicated to information on contemplative eldering. It includes information about retreats focusing on aging, a lecture series, and online contemplative eldering communities. For more information, visit <http://mepkinabbey.org/wordpress/mepkin-abbey-institute-of-contemplative-eldering/>

70 and Still Counting is a July retreat for women religious living out their seventies and wondering how to make the most of it; what is at the core of their lives as women religious. For more information visit <http://mannahouse.org/women-religious/>

From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

Like any group of people, as religious we have a shared lexicon so familiar to us that, in some ways, it serves to define who we are. Language is powerful in that way. It can quickly create boundaries that designate an in-group and correspondingly, an out-group. We toss about terms like “jubilees” and “professions” and only realize our jargon when we see family members perplexed until we translate the terms to “anniversaries” and “vow ceremonies.” Because language is alive and always changing, words like “horarium” and “refectory” may have fallen out of style for some communities, but I bet that most of us still know what they mean.



Mission and ministry are two words that have become a sort of jargon for us. We've talked so long about living the mission and doing ministry that the two words have become interchangeable. They both collapse into a doing. But it seems important, and central to Brother Stephen's article in this issue, that we take time to understand these two words clearly. What happens if we are no longer engaged in active ministry? Are we still living expressions of mission? Surely, mission creates the minister, but does it also create the member? Does the member ever cease to be minister?

As we move into the coming days of Holy Week, perhaps it's a good time to take stock of just what mission and ministry mean in our lives. Faced with the seeming ending of Jesus' mission in the shadow of the cross, we are invited to enter the mind and heart of Jesus, transcending the scandal of the cross to plummet into the heart and mind of God, into mission. May this Easter journey be blessed for us all.

From the Offices of NRRO

Brother Bob Metzger, SM, Associate Director for Planning and Education

I think we can all name members of our congregations who have been able to make a graceful transition from their lifetime choice of ministry as Brother Steve talks about in his article. We can probably also name people with whom we have lived in community who have not been as graceful in this transition.



I recently came across a quote from remarks made by Pope Francis during a General Audience in St. Peter's Square, March 11, 2015. I'd like to share them with you as I think they summarize many of Steve's ideas.

“Prayer incessantly purifies the heart. Praise and supplication to God prevent the hardening of the heart in resentment and selfishness. How sad it is to see the cynicism of an elderly person who has lost the sense of his or her own testimony, who is disdainful towards the young and does not communicate the wisdom of a lifetime! Instead, it is beautiful to see the encouragement that an elderly person is able to transmit to the young in search of the meaning of faith and life. It is truly the mission of grandparents, the vocation of the elderly. The words of the elderly hold something special for the young. And they know this. The words my grandmother wrote to me on the day of my priestly ordination I still carry with me now, in my breviary; I often read them and this does me good.”

We hope Steve's reflections will be helpful in your communal journey of aging.

Calendar

March 31

- Direct Care Assistance applications due (postmarked by March 31st)

April 24 - 25

- NRRO Consultant In-Service Workshop

April 26 - 28

- Planning and Implementation Workshop, Dayton, OH (filled)

May 17

- NRRO Webinar on activities for elders Presented by Dayna Hurst: 1 PM ET

May 24 - 25

- NRRO Dementia Workshop at Bergamo Center, Dayton, OH

Late June

- Direct Care Assistance checks mailed

Reminder: Stay Connected

- Please send changes in address, phone, e-mail, or congregational leadership to the NRRO, c/o Karen Canas (kcanas@uscbb.org), so that we may keep our records and mailing lists updated.
- If you are not currently receiving “Engaging Aging” and would like to do so, please send your name and address to NRRO, c/o Karen Canas (kcanas@uscbb.org) or call Karen at 202-541-3215

Copy and Circulate

- We encourage you to copy and circulate *Engaging Aging*. Help us to expand our reach and serve new people.

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