

Growing old gratefully

By Father William J. Byron, S.J.

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It was my privilege to spend the last week of May leading a retreat for “senior priests” at St. Mary’s Center for Continuing Formation in Baltimore.

The first day of the retreat, May 25, was Memorial Day, and I was able to establish my credentials to lead the group by announcing that day was my 88th birthday. I may well have been the most senior of the dozen men who came from Arlington, Virginia; Baltimore; Brooklyn, New York; Camden, New Jersey; and Raleigh, North Carolina; for five days of prayer and reflection together. Most were retired from active ministry; all had lived through decades of remarkable change in the Catholic Church.

“Growing Old Gratefully” became our theme as we took a cue from a small book by Jesuit Father John LaFarge, “Reflections on Growing Old: Thoughts for turning the latter years into the best years of life.” Father LaFarge, who was 82 when he wrote this book, saw old age as a gift, “a very precious gift, not a calamity; since it is a gift, I thank God for it daily.” We adopted that outlook and paid prayerful attention to the idea of gratitude.

The old American vernacular “much obliged” was used as a way of saying thanks. We noted that gratitude is at the base of moral obligation and declared ourselves to be much obliged to give praise and thanks to God every day.

Growing old gratefully is what poet Robert Browning had in mind when he opened

his poem “Rabbi Ben Ezra” with these words: “Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be. The last of life for which the first was made. Our times are in His hand. Who saith ‘A whole I planned, Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!’”

It takes faith to see hope and to live it, so we followed our faith to the Book of Jeremiah and prayed with the prophet: “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord; the Lord will be their trust,” (Jer 17:7).

And we turned to St. Paul for the useful reminder that “we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

And we opened every session with the favorite prayer — “Come, Holy Spirit” — of America’s best-known priest, Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, who died a few months ago, shortly before his 98th birthday and at whose funeral the printed program included this note:

“The Holy Spirit is the light and strength of my life, for which I am eternally grateful, My best daily prayer, apart from the Mass and breviary, continues to be simply ‘Come, Holy Spirit.’ No better prayer, no better results: much light and much strength.”

Our days together were grounded in two scriptural passages: first, John 12:24-26 where Jesus speaks of the mystery of the wheat grain that must first fall into the ground as if to die and once it does, it brings forth fruit. This is the basis for what Father LaFarge called the mystery of “growth through diminishment” as he pointed out that the aging believer can unite his or her diminishment with the passion of

Christ for the growth of others.

Similarly, we turned to Galatians 5:22-23 where Paul offers instruction on how to “live by the Spirit,” pointing out that the “fruit” of the Spirit — i.e., evidence that the Spirit is present within us — is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Plenty there to reflect on; more than enough to assist anyone who wants to grow old gratefully.

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