



# STUDIES

IN  
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

## The Gifts of Aging

*Jesuit Elders in Their Own Words*

GERALD L. McKEVITT, S.J.

43/3 • AUTUMN 2011

## THE SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

The Seminar is composed of a number of Jesuits appointed from their provinces in the United States.

It concerns itself with topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially United States Jesuits, and communicates the results to the members of the provinces through its publication, *STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS*. This is done in the spirit of Vatican II's recommendation that religious institutes recapture the original inspiration of their founders and adapt it to the circumstances of modern times. The Seminar welcomes reactions or comments in regard to the material that it publishes.

The Seminar focuses its direct attention on the life and work of the Jesuits of the United States. The issues treated may be common also to Jesuits of other regions, to other priests, religious, and laity, to both men and women. Hence, the journal, while meant especially for American Jesuits, is not exclusively for them. Others who may find it helpful are cordially welcome to make use of it.

### CURRENT MEMBERS OF THE SEMINAR

Shay Auerbach, S.J., is pastor of Sacred Heart Parish, Richmond, Va. (2011)

Michael Barber, S.J., is dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at St. Louis University, St. Louis, Mo. (2010)

Richard A. Blake, S.J., is chairman of the Seminar and editor of *STUDIES*; he teaches film studies at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass. (2002)

Mark Bosco, S.J., teaches English and theology at Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Ill. (2009)

Terrence Dempsey, S.J., teaches art history and directs the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art at St. Louis University, St. Louis, Mo. (2009)

Paul Janowiak, S.J., teaches theology at the Jesuit School of Theology and Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Cal. (2010)

Francis X. McAloon, S.J., teaches theology at the Jesuit School of Theology and the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Cal. (2009)

Robert E. Scully, S.J., teaches history and law at LeMoyne College, Syracuse, N.Y. (2011)

Thomas D. Stegman, S.J., teaches New Testament at the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass. (2010)

Gilbert Sunghera, S.J., teaches architecture at the University of Detroit-Mercy, Detroit, Mich. (2011)

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# THE GIFTS OF AGING

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Gerald L. McKevitt, S.J.

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*the first word . . .*

We've all been in those conversations. Someone will mention a Jesuit classmate who has just gone to the hospital for a test or "procedure." Within seconds the talk gathers an uncontrollable downward momentum. The grave fathers recall other classmates who waited too long to see a doctor, and then they start comparing their own symptoms and specialists, prescriptions and replacement parts. By this time anyone under the age of sixty has gone running off to an early dinner. Undeterred, the brethren continue to work variations on the theme: It's tough to get old. One time, even I was starting to feel depressed, sadly beyond relief from my own self-administered, olive-flavored over-the-counter medication. In an attempt to derail this express train to the columbarium, I noted that in one respect I really looked forward to old age. At last I would have the freedom to say whatever popped into my head without fear of repercussions. Ah, the delight of being able to say, "Father Provincial, you were the dumbest man in the world the day you were born, you'll be the dumbest man in the world the day you die, and you won't have missed a day in between."

The tactic worked. Everybody laughed enthusiastically. Then one of the brethren sat upright in his chair, and with mock seriousness, looked straight into my eyes and said, "And this will be different . . . how?" He had me, and in fact got a bigger laugh from our merrie band of crepe hangers than I had. The question was right on target, and everyone knew it. As one who has marched through life with his mouth fully two steps ahead of his brain, I was an easy target. To borrow a plumbing metaphor, in my construction, the DNA designers failed to install an adequate series of filters and safety valves 'twixt mind and mouth. If I live long enough to make it to a province infirmary, it strains the imagination to think I'll have been transformed into a nice little old man that the nurses will refer to as "a sweetheart." More likely is this exchange after having been cajoled into drinking some foul-tasting medicine: "Most nurses think scrubs make them look fat, but on you they're an improvement." "Hold still, Father. I've got that special, extra long, rusty needle for your injection. There, didn't that feel good? No? It surely made me feel better."

Maybe this is an exaggeration. Others have grown mellow in their old age, so perhaps I won't be running in the curmudgeon sweepstakes after all. Some Jesuits seem to have navigated the many transitions in life quite successfully. How can one prepare for these changes, or is aging something that sim-

ply happens to us when we aren't looking? Surely most of us have thoughts of retirement somewhere in the back of our minds, but we're very happy to keep them there. Most people don't have this luxury. Our lay contemporaries have to start planning for their retirement in their middle years and think very carefully about savings, investments, insurance, and 401(k) accounts. Our retirement funds are generally handled for us. They have grandchildren to remind them of a normal passing of the generations. We don't have such markers, especially these days when we have so few younger Jesuits. A good number of lay people look forward to a time when they no longer have to trudge off to the office or the plant or the store, and think fondly of the day when they can move to a smaller house in a nicer climate, where they can fish or play golf, even in the middle of the week. Many of us are so wedded to our work that we remain victimized by the illusion we will be able to "stay in harness" until we drop. Sickness and infirmity don't enter into the picture. Being "put on the shelf" or "put out to pasture" strikes many Jesuits as a death sentence, instead of the normal process of life.

Clearly, with the improvements in medicine, Jesuits are living a lot longer, and if my logic holds there are proportionately a lot more older men on the scene. As a result the Society has to face the traditional challenges on a far-greater scale. The first is organizational. We have an enormous amount of experience and wisdom accumulated by men who may no longer have the stamina to utilize their knowledge as they once did. How can the Society tap into this resource without limiting the creativity, freedom, and imagination of the younger people, Jesuit and lay, men and women, who have assumed responsibility for running our traditional ministries and starting new ones? Can a province, a school or parish, retreat house, or social center appreciate the achievements of the past without being imprisoned by them? We say yes, of course, but we have to admit it's not easy.

The second challenge is personal for each individual Jesuit. Navigating changes is "not for sissies." It's really difficult to step down from the stage-coach and leave the reins in someone else's hands, especially if it seems the new driver wants to take a different route, or trade in the old buggy for a new horseless carriage. And it's even more difficult to develop new interests and responsibilities in a different environment and with a different body to work with. Do we consider the assignment "to pray for the Church and the Society" as the ultimate insult or as a challenging new phase in Jesuit life? Of course, I don't know personally how this works, since I haven't yet made some of these transitions, but I'm getting to the point when it's important to start thinking about the future in realistic terms. What kind of an elderly, retired Jesuit am I likely to become, given the unforeseen variables of health? I don't like the idea, but let's face it, I'm not going to keep teaching nineteen-year-olds about John Ford and Howard Hawks many more years. One day I'll be replaced by a younger person, if not by a cell-phone app.

We can think of continuity in our Jesuit lives. Many of us had role models who were highly influential in fostering our vocations. The process is just as important throughout our lives. We learn a lot from one another. This concept underlies Jerry McKeivitt's monumental effort to interview dozens of Jesuits who have made these later transitions gracefully. With the wisdom they have earned by a life of service, they can tell us a great deal about planning for our own future. They show us how to do it. What do they have to say to us about Jesuit life once the frantic activity slows? Their reflections are moving, inspiring, and, if I may use the oft-misused word, edifying. It's a topic than many of us may find uncomfortable thinking about. We can be grateful that Jerry has courageously raised the curtain on an almost taboo subject for our reflection, conversation, and prayer. As we read their words and share their experiences, it's gratifying to realize that old age has compensations that extend beyond insulting provincials and nurses.

### *A few second words . . .*

Speaking of the march of generations, the fall issue traditionally brings the annual set of changes to our masthead. Bentley Anderson and Mick McCarthy have finished their three-year terms, and both crowned their time on the Seminar with splendid contributions. Bentley gave us *Numa J. Rousseve Jr.: Creole, Catholic, and Jesuit* (Winter 2010). He will continue teaching African and African American Studies at Fordham. Mick provided "*Let me love more passionately*": *Religious Celibacy in a Secular Age* (Summer 2011). He returns to teaching theology and classics at Santa Clara, but now with the added responsibility of directing the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education. The Seminar will miss their companionship, and I'll miss their wise counsel. On behalf of the entire U.S. Assistancy, thanks.

Valedictories in May lead immediately into orientations for new freshmen in September. Meet our incoming class.

Shay Auerbach, from the Maryland Province, comes to us from Richmond, Va., where he is pastor of Sacred Heart Church and president of the board of Sacred Heart Center. He earned a master's degree in theoretical linguistics from Georgetown and is currently a member of the steering committee of the Mexico-based *Servicio Jesuita a los Migrantes-Centroamérica y Norteamérica* as coordinator of its social-pastoral dimension.

Bob Scully, New York Province, is associate professor of law and history at LeMoyne College in Syracuse, N.Y. In his teaching and writing, he has focused on early-modern European history: the Renaissance and Reformation, and the Tudor/Stuart era in Britain and Ireland. His book, *Into the Lion's Den*:

*The Jesuit Mission in Elizabethan England and Wales, 1580-1603*, should be available from the Institute of Jesuit Sources later this year.

Gilbert Sunghera, of the California Province, is assistant professor of architecture at the University of Detroit-Mercy. While doing post-professional studies at Yale, he combined work at the Schools of Architecture and Divinity, researching the relationship between contemporary design and sacred space, and exploring the question of the influence of religion in the public square. He developed a national liturgical-space consulting practice housed in the School of Architecture at the University of Detroit-Mercy.

Welcome to the Seminar. We thank them for their generosity in accepting this appointment and look forward to their editorial and authorial contributions over the next three years.

*Richard A. Blake, S.J.*

Editor



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## The Walker

You offer me a walker, and I suppose  
it's time: a necessary nonsense,

to be slighted but used as needed,  
and I wonder what else we use

to maneuver; what rigs to we construct  
to steer our way? Here I am often,

in the midst of prayer, and I cannot  
find a crutch to lead me on to where

I want to go and I wonder if I am  
mistaken, if the rig I want is not mine

to find, not mine to hold, but someone else's.

—William J. Rewak, S.J.

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*Gerald L. McKeivitt, S.J., is the Ellucuria Professor for Jesuit Studies at Santa Clara University. His most recent book is Brokers of Culture, Italian Jesuits in the American West, 1848–1919, which in 2007 received the Howard R. Marraro Award, sponsored by the American Catholic Historical Society. A former member of the Jesuit Seminar on Spirituality, he contributed Italian Jesuits in Maryland: A Clash of Theological Cultures (39/1, Spring 2007).*

# THE GIFTS OF AGING

## *Jesuit Elders in Their Own Words*

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*Extended interviews with older Jesuits shatter many of the common stereotypes. These men bring a wealth of experience into the later phases of their lives, and many feel that they continue to grow in their vocations. Despite a perceptible decline in health and abilities, some have navigated the transition to old age successfully and have found not only peace, but happiness.*

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The very old . . . have gone before us on a road we too perhaps must take, and I think we should inquire of them what sort of road it is.

—Plato, *The Republic*<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

**A**re you happy in your vocation? That was the key question Jesuits were once invited to ponder during the annual conversation with their provincial. Although the contemporary account of conscience may address many other issues, this most basic query is as relevant today as it ever was. Contentment with one's call is still a signpost in discerning a Jesuit's various apostolic missions and whether or not he perseveres in his vocation. But what about old age? Is contentment still possible in a man's advancing years when memory fades, energy lapses, and the indignities of diminution loom

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<sup>1</sup>*The Republic of Plato*, trans. with an introduction by R. E. Allen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 3.

large? Many elderly Jesuits insist that it is. For them the single most important question, even in one's final years remains, Are you happy in your vocation?

That is the topic explored in this issue of *STUDIES*. Drawing on interviews with veteran religious, it seeks to discover if Jesuits do, in fact, age happily in the Society. Second, what accounts for the fact that some men age gracefully while others seem never to attain tranquility? Since we must all grow old someday, the answer to these questions is of crucial importance to every Jesuit—young, middle-aged, or ancient. What the journalist David Brooks has said about old folks holds true for each of us: "The elderly. They are our future."<sup>2</sup>

But how can an octogenarian hobbled by weakened muscles and fading memory be content? In our advancing years "we can't run, or even walk, as fast as we used to," one writer notes, and we discover "aches and pains in parts of our bodies we never even noticed before."<sup>3</sup> "Threescore and ten," Psalm 90 warns, is the span of our lives, and anything after eighty "is but toil and trouble." According to popular wisdom, old age is a time of curse, as we are reminded in the tiresome cliché, "Old age is not for sissies." Pete Townsend's famous song, "My Generation," puts it still more crassly, "Hope I die before I get old."

Contrary to common opinion, recent studies show that people become happier as they get older. According to a report released in 2010 by the National Academy of Sciences, seniors tend to be more content than people in middle age and by the time they reach age eighty-five, they are more satisfied than they were at eighteen.<sup>4</sup> We assume that failing health brings misery, and yet experts say that people adapt to most chronic health problems.<sup>5</sup> Thus, despite heart by-pass surgery and a once broken hip, an eighty-year-old Georgetown Jesuit reports, "I am enjoying life immensely."<sup>6</sup>

## The Interview Method

This essay begins with some basic observations about aging that are familiar terrain. I then examine the cohort of Jesuit interviewees whose observations constitute the core of the monograph. The group all entered religious life prior to the Second Vatican Council and the series of general congregations that reshaped Jesuit living in the mid-twentieth century. The essay then shifts to

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<sup>2</sup>David Brooks, "The Geezers' Crusade," *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 2010.

<sup>3</sup>Nicholas Bakalar, "Happiness May Come with Age, Study Says," *New York Times*, June 1, 2010.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 88.

<sup>6</sup>*Lives of the Georgetown Jesuits, Volume 3, Rev. Edward W. Bodnar, S.J.* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Jesuit Community, 2008), 24.

more unfamiliar territory, giving the reader a peek into the interior experience of Jesuit elders through their responses to a series of questions. After decades of religious life, much of it spent during a highly unstable period in church history, what explains a man's perseverance? Has the Society disappointed him, and would he do it over again? How does one cope when physical diminishment and the prospect of taking a final bow become one's new reality? What is the spirituality of old folks? Does a Jesuit's relationship with God and his prayer evolve over time? The primary aim of the essay is not merely to discover what seasoned Jesuits report about growing old, but to discern in the narrative arc of their response whatever might enable the rest of us to lead contented lives. The article concludes that for many Jesuits, old age is not a burden, or not principally a burden—it is a gift.

Answers to the queries were not obtained by means of a statistical survey, but by methods commonly employed by historians and other social scientists. Research required the perusal of a growing body of literature on the subject of aging as well as memoirs of Jesuits, including transcriptions of thirty-six interviews with elderly Jesuits published by the New England Jesuits Oral History Program and by the Georgetown Jesuit Community. My principal source of information, however, was interviews I conducted with nearly forty older Jesuits drawn from the ten provinces of the United States Assistency. My respondents were all over the age of seventy; a few younger men were also interviewed for a broader view of aging in the Society. Our conversations were based on a questionnaire, the text of which appears as an appendix to this monograph.

Who are these Jesuits? Some are acquaintances of mine; others were recommended to me by colleagues, who, learning of my project when I visited their communities, said, "You must be sure to interview so-and so." They represent a broad spectrum of ministries: pastors of parishes, social-ministry workers, writers, retreat directors, former rectors and provincials, high-school teachers, university professors, and administrators of all types. To a man, they are viewed by Jesuit peers as successful religious. Many of them are still active, and some hold jobs of major responsibility. A portion of them are either retired or working part time; others reside in a province retirement community. Some individuals suffer poor health, and a few are dying.

One notable attribute of these Jesuits was their unblinkered frankness. Although American males are said to be socialized not to talk about feelings, these men with few exceptions responded openly and gracefully to my many queries. Because of their receptiveness and the often intimate nature of our conversations, the names and institutional affiliations of the participants have been altered to preserve confidentiality. Why were my interlocutors so forthcoming? One individual said the interview was personally helpful because "it gave me a chance to reflect on how fortunate I have been." Another compared the conversation to a mini-retreat. Since most of them are priests, they are themselves accustomed to receiving confidences; they are skilled in the ministry of conver-

sation, a paramount apostolate of the Society of Jesus; and they have spent a lifetime rendering themselves transparent in the account of conscience.

Oral-history research of this sort offers unique benefits. Its aim is to discover what it is like to inhabit a specific historic time and place as a member of a specific group in society—in this instance, elderly American Jesuits. Oral history often provides understanding of marginal or under-represented subgroups within a mainstream culture.<sup>7</sup> It is my contention that older Jesuits constitute an under-studied cohort within the larger Society of Jesus. Thus this project not only preserves information about an aspect of religious life (aging) that might otherwise remain undocumented or lost, it also creates the possibility of a cross-generational conversation on a subject we Jesuits rarely talk about. Other benefits flow from the fact that oral historians gather information by means of a questionnaire that is open ended. This procedure permits them to probe areas of interest to the researcher while simultaneously enabling respondents to move the conversation in directions of interest to themselves. Therefore, exchanges sometimes veer off in interesting directions not anticipated by the researcher, and replies often have a spontaneous or thinking-out-loud quality.<sup>8</sup> Depending on the respondent's disposition, this conversational approach allows the interviewer to probe the affective experiences and interior life of the interviewees. This outcome can be richly rewarding, as will be seen in the following pages.

There are a few caveats about oral history that the reader should keep in mind. Because the number of persons interviewed was limited, their experiences, while illuminating, may or may not typify a larger population. Hence the conclusions drawn in this monograph cannot be applied universally to all elderly Jesuits. Moreover, my interlocutors consisted predominately of individuals whom others typify as well liked and successful in their ministry. Rare was the individual who might be described as bitter or unhappy; on the contrary, most of these religious seem content. Indeed, one of the reasons for interviewing them was to discover how they managed to deal so gracefully with the limitations that accompany aging. Another caution: this essay is as much descriptive and anecdotal as it is analytical. While it draws on the finding of experts in gerontology whose works shed light on the experience of aging, my principal aim as a historian has been to discover what that experience is like for Jesuits and then, if possible, to explore how the rest of us might draw on their wisdom. Evidence suggests that while the contour of much of life's journey is beyond our control, we can, in fact, make choices that help forge a felicitous old age.

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<sup>7</sup>"Oral History," The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb>, accessed Jan. 3, 2011.

<sup>8</sup>Linda Shopes, "What Is Oral History?" <http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu>, accessed Jan. 3, 2011.

## Jesuits and Aging

There is a pressing need that we prepare for that journey because we are living longer. Since 1840 an American's life expectancy has steadily climbed by a quarter of a year every year with the result that it is now about seventy-eight, an age well beyond anything previously imagined possible.<sup>9</sup> Fifty years ago, Jesuits who were seventy years and older constituted only 6 percent of the Society's population in the United States. By 2010 that cohort had mushroomed to 66.35 percent.<sup>10</sup> This contrast has not escaped the notice of Jesuits who have lived through this era of unprecedented seniority. "You're just stung by the number," one priest remarks, thinking back to when he turned seventy. "I was twice as old as my father ever was," and I am now even "older than my mother" became. Some experts claim that at least half the babies born in the United States and the developed world today can expect to live to be one hundred.<sup>11</sup> This new-found longevity will have profound consequences for the Society.

The social implications of aging do not, however, snag the attention of the rank-and-file Jesuit. The subject may preoccupy the elderly—"I think about aging a lot," says one oldster. "I'm always reminded of it"—but the topic sparks little attention in most of us.<sup>12</sup> There is a flood of literature on the spirituality of younger and midlife people, observes the Jesuit theologian Gerald M. Fagin, but "we've neglected the elderly, assuming old age is not a time for growth."<sup>13</sup> The Jesuit gerontologist Myles N. Sheehan has written and lectured widely on the subject, and both Fagin and William A. Barry have written on the need to develop a Jesuit spirituality for the whole of life. The New York Jesuit Province home page contains a thoughtful essay, "A Jesuit Approach to Aging."<sup>14</sup> Apart

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<sup>9</sup>*Time*, Feb. 22, 2010, 51, 68–71; Jim Oeppen and James W. Vaupel, "Democracy Enhanced: Broken Limits to Life Expectancy," *Science* 296 (May 2002): 1029–31.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Gaunt, S.J., and Anthony Jennings, "The Assignment and Age of American Jesuits, 1970–2000: Challenging Common Misperceptions," 2006, Jesuit Conference document; and "Mean and Median Ages," January 22, 2010, U.S. Assistancy. Statistics made available by Thomas Gaunt, S.J., and Charles Kelley, S.J., U.S. Jesuit Conference, Washington, D.C.

<sup>11</sup>*Time*, Feb. 22, 2010, 51.

<sup>12</sup>If the members of the California Province are representative (and there's every reason to believe they are), Jesuits prefer not to talk about growing old and retirement. A survey completed in 2008 concluded that among all age groups in the province there exists a "culture of avoidance and denial" on the issue. See "California Province of the Society of Jesus: Jesuit Retirement Survey 2008," by Paul W. Speer (California Province of the Society of Jesus, Los Gatos, California).

<sup>13</sup>Gerald M. Fagin, cited in "Aging Gracefully in the Spirit," *The Southern Jesuit* (Fall 2010), 21.

<sup>14</sup>Gerald M. Fagin, "The Spiritual Exercises and a Spirituality for the Later Years," *The Way*, 43 (Jan. 2004): 67–79. Three insightful monographs on aging have appeared in *STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS*: Joseph F. Conwell, S. J., "Living and Dying in the Society of Jesus"

from the occasional memoir, there have been few accounts of aging by Jesuits in their own words. Why the hush? It may be traceable to the fact that the Society's founding documents are mute on the topic. St. Ignatius wrote in the Constitutions about sickness and death, but he said nothing of old age—perhaps because he had no experience of it in the Society. St. Francis Xavier died at forty-six, Pierre Favre at forty, and Laínez at fifty-three. Ignatius himself survived until his sixty-fourth year, prompting Joseph F. Conwell to observe, “in the Society he knew, he was the old man.”<sup>15</sup>

Disinterest may also be ascribed to a misreading of elements in the Society's spirituality that appear to idealize action and productivity. Although ministry rightfully receives our top priority, a Jesuit's apostolic activity can morph into an apparent or disguised good. If zeal “fosters workaholic tendencies or prevents the Jesuit from attending to other areas of his life,” a psychologist warns, the inactivity presumed to characterize old age will be regarded with contempt and embarrassment.<sup>16</sup> Jesuit reluctance to explore the topic is reinforced by secular culture. As Americans, we live in an achievement-oriented society in which worth is decided by accomplishment and success. In this context, growing old seems “all loss and no gain.”<sup>17</sup>

Although Jesuits have not spilled much ink on the issue, there is a mushrooming body of literature on gerontology. One of the most informative is by the psychiatrist George E. Vaillant, author of *Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life from the Landmark Harvard Study of Adult Development*. This project, lauded as “one of the longest-running—and probably the most exhaustive—longitudinal studies of mental and physical well-being in history,” began as a study of healthy, well-adjusted Harvard sophomore males in 1937.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on data gathered over the next seventy years, Vaillant's team identifies seven factors that foretell healthy aging, both physically and psychologically. In addition to developing mature ways of coping with troubles, they list education, stable marriage, not smoking, avoidance of alcohol dependence, mod-

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(May 1980); William A. Barry, S.J., “Jesuit Spirituality for the Whole of Life” (Jan. 2003); and Thomas H. Clancy, S.J., “Veteran Witnesses: Their Experience of Jesuit Life” (Jan. 1980); Peter Van Bremmen of the German Province has written about his experience as an elderly Jesuit in *Summoned at Every Age: Finding God in Our Later Lives* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup>Joseph F. Conwell, S. J., “Living and Dying in the Society of Jesus,” *STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS* 12, no. 3 (May 1980): 2, 17, 44.

<sup>16</sup>Charles M. Shelton, “Reflections on the Mental Health of Jesuits,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 23 (Sept. 1991): 12.

<sup>17</sup>“A Jesuit Approach to Aging,” New York Province of the Society of Jesus, [nysj.org/s/31/nysj.aspx?sid=316&gid=1&pgid=1005](http://nysj.org/s/31/nysj.aspx?sid=316&gid=1&pgid=1005) (accessed Jan. 19, 2010).

<sup>18</sup>George E. Vaillant, M.D., *Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life from the Landmark Harvard Study of Adult Development* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002).



erate exercise, and healthy weight. They also discovered that social aptitude, rather than intelligence or parental social class, leads to successful aging.<sup>19</sup>

The Harvard Study has surprisingly little to say, however, about religion, which it contrasts with spirituality. Most religious beliefs are rife with “rigid and serious” dogma, Vaillant proclaims, and hence it is “hope and love rather than faith that seemed most clearly associated” with aging well. “The presence or absence of either spirituality or religious adherence” has little to do with it. Moreover, “the jury is still out as to whether religious faith and spirituality really deepen in old age.”<sup>20</sup> In a popular book about aging, another author even avoids interviewing clergy. Why? Because their “affiliation to an institution might curb his or her individuality.”<sup>21</sup>

This contradicts most Jesuits’ experiences. In 1980, when the Detroit Province Jesuit James F. Maguire was asked in a survey what sustained him and provided satisfaction in his life, the seventy-five-year-old initially ascribed his contentment to “life with my Jesuit brothers and my work with its close contacts with university and alumni and friends.” But “the most basic explanation of my contentment and happiness in the Jesuit life is spiritual. Slowly—ever so slowly—over the fifty-seven years of my life as Jesuit, I have been coming to experience in a modest yet gradually deepening way the companionship of Christ.”<sup>22</sup> If Maguire’s experience is common, religious commitment is a major determinant of the outcome of a Jesuit’s life.

My own curiosity about aging was piqued by two experiences, one of them quite pedestrian. I have long wondered why popular magazines feature cartoons depicting old people on park benches. What do seniors think about as they sit on their perches watching the world go by? How, I’ve asked myself, does their (apparently) leisurely existence differ from my own busy life? These queries found partial resolution five years ago. While teaching at Fordham University, I had emergency spinal surgery that left me feeling old at age sixty-six. Recovering in the New York Province infirmary, I came in daily contact with many men who were ill and older than myself. Conversations with these Jesuits and a prolonged convalescence later in California led me to examine what it is like to age in the Society. After some reading on the subject, I began interviewing elderly Jesuits across the assistancy about their experience. Those encounters resulted in some of the richest conversations I have had in my life. This essay is structured around questions aimed at discovering how

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<sup>19</sup>Joshua Wolf Shenk, “What Makes Us Happy?” *The Atlantic*, June 2009. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/what-makes-us-happy/7439> (accessed April 2, 2009).

<sup>20</sup>Vaillant, *Aging Well*, 257, 259–60, 263.

<sup>21</sup>Henry Alford, *How to Live: A Search for Wisdom from Old People* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2009), 25.

<sup>22</sup>James F. Maguire, in Clancy, “Veteran Witnesses,” 18.

the elderly and the retired (they're not necessarily identical) interpret their experience.

My primary audience is not octogenarians—there is not much I can tell them that they don't already know—but younger readers who might profit from hearing their elders speak intimately on a topic seldom discussed in the rec room. It is my hope that what Jesuits find in these pages will help them make discerning choices about their own lives. Since more of us are living longer, we will spend more of our days as elderly persons. We would be wise, therefore, to ponder what will eventually be required of us, as Socrates urged. "I delight in conversing with the very old. They have gone before us on a road we too perhaps must take," he told Cephalus; "and I think we should inquire of them what sort of road it is, rugged and difficult, or smooth and easily traveled."<sup>23</sup> A gerontologist puts it more directly. "Old age is like a minefield; if you see footprints leading to the other side, step into them."<sup>24</sup>

## II. Telling Their Story: Conversations with Jesuit Elders

### Who Is Old?

Jesuits, like other Americans, do not agree on what constitutes old age. When a health crisis strikes, however, uncertainty quickly dissolves. "Do you see all those pill bottles over there on the desk?" one octogenarian tells me. "I had a heart attack" and so I now see a lot of doctors and take many medicines. "That's a sign of old age." Asked when he began to think of himself as old, an eighty-seven-year-old former pastor says, "I didn't really think of it until two or three years ago" because "my health was good, but then I got sick and collapsed at Mass. It was then," he recounts, "that I said to myself, 'You're getting old!'"

Self-perception does not always correspond to a person's external reality. As others have observed, "Old age takes everyone by surprise, and no one really ever comes to terms with it."<sup>25</sup> The urge to deny diminution is powerful. There are seventy-year-old Jesuits who look in a mirror and behold a fifty-year-old. Perhaps because celibates have no spouse, children, or grandchildren who, like mirrors, might enable them to gauge their aging, they are often surprised when others treat them as old-timers. "I had a funny experience on a bus in San Francisco," a California Jesuit recalls. "When I got on, a little old lady" seated in the section reserved for old folks and disabled persons "looked at me and offered me her place." A teacher in his late seventies says, "to my students, I

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<sup>23</sup>Plato, *The Republic*, 3.

<sup>24</sup>Vaillant, *Aging Well*, 4.

<sup>25</sup>Jill Lepore, "Twilight: Growing Old and Even Older," *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2011, 31.

probably appear ancient. I have to remind myself of that because I feel like I'm fifty." If we are lucky, however, we come gradually to know ourselves more accurately through others' perceptions of us. "One reason that you think about being old," a busy fellow in his eighties observes, "is because people think of you that way. You begin in a societal context." Kids begin saying, "Can I help you, sir?" and others ask you for advice. Or, on the other hand, you find yourself newly ignored. In short, you encounter either "deference or a lack of interest." Therefore, you respond to that and you begin to conceive yourself differently than before.

Oldsters readily agree that age has drawbacks, but they differ when it comes to naming them. If one no longer has meaningful employment, for example, that becomes a burden. One nonworker claims the worst part about being retired is that "your world becomes very small and you can become terribly self-centered. That's why social intercourse helps take your attention away from yourself and enables you to realize other things are happening that are important." Otherwise, he jokes, "you become more of a hypochondriac than you already are. Every little ache and pain is not the owl calling my name!"

If a man has occupied center stage most of his life, aging inevitably brings unwelcome marginalization. "I've had to come to grips with being not of the future but of the past," a respected Jesuit says, "and knowing that, willy-nilly, people look at me that way." They are "nice about it, but you just know that when they think about whom to ask advice from or whom to count on, it's not going to be you. It's the people behind you, and that stings your vanity." Thus old age often nudges an individual—perhaps for the first time in his life in a major way—to explore the unwelcome but holy road of humility. "I don't know if I think about aging as much as I feel it," one man reports. "What do I like about aging? I don't like it!" a septuagenarian laughs, rubbing arthritic knees. "The worst part," another man concurs, "is the physical limitation"—and yet studies show that even chronic health problems may have little long-term effect on happiness because we tend to adjust to them.<sup>26</sup>

It is drooping energy rather than physical discomfort that elicits the loudest lament. "I get up fairly early in the morning," a Jesuit in his eighties reports, "and the first thing I think of is, When should I take my next rest?" "Aging impinges pretty steadily on my consciousness," another senior says, "I don't work as consistently, energetically, and effectively" as I once did. This awareness came like a bolt out of the blue to one Jesuit while preaching the Exercises. "I remember about half way through the retreat telling myself, 'I can't do this anymore.' My general health was good but I didn't have the energy." Psychic vigor fades too. "I can no longer do things off the cuff," a still active Midwesterner observes. "Now, if I've got to give a talk or something, I really

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<sup>26</sup>See Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, cited in Nicholas D. Kristof, "Our Basic Human Pleasures," *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 2010.

have to prepare." In the past, putting a workshop together "never weighed me down." I did it quickly and at the last minute. "I can't do that anymore."

Rare is the individual who does not experience memory lapses. "The process has been rather gradual," an eighty-two-year-old observes, but "I find myself scrambling for names, even ones that are quite familiar." Another senior grouches, "I can't call the students by name. They click in about three minutes after I've passed them" in the hallway. "So I can't say, 'Hi, Carol.' I don't like that." Fading recall sometimes provokes worry about darker possibilities. "Once in a while, as my memory gets worse, I think to myself, 'Am I going to end up gaga?' That's a scary thought since my mother had Alzheimer's." Aware of these fears, experts on aging maintain that one of the variables that predicts healthy aging is having mature defenses or an adaptive coping style. Successful oldsters "seem constantly to be reinventing their lives" because they have "the capacity to turn lemons into lemonade and not to turn molehills into mountains."<sup>27</sup> Thus a Jesuit with a gift for self-mockery says of his memory lapses: "I guess not grumbling about it and being amused about it" is the best response. "You've got to be able to laugh at it. So you say to yourself and to your friends, 'Well, you see what a horse's ass I've become!'"

### **Accepting Shortcomings of the Society**

Aware of these challenges, most of us dread old age. We have all encountered seniors who give every impression of being miserable and who communicate their unhappiness to others. Anyone who lived in the late 1960s and 1970s can tell tales of angry elders, often alcoholic, who were the terror of their communities. So common was that experience that members of many provinces coined unkind, if telling, terms to describe the cohort of grieving old-timers who loudly dominated the post-conciliar era: "dinosaurs," "old sweets," "the Sanhedrin," "Flat Earth Society." Programed by their training into a fixed-in-amber way of being Jesuit, many of these individuals, middle-aged priests when Vatican II took place, could not be de-programed. Hence their angry lament, "This is not the Society I joined!"

There may be fewer cranky clerics around today, if anecdotal evidence is creditable. "I've been in this place at different times in my life," a former administrator says regarding his province's retirement center, where he now lives. Decades ago, the facility was filled with "the cast-offs, the angry and bitter guys. But now you have guys who have really done a life's work." They are "very good people," and they are wonderful to live with. The superior of the same center during that earlier era thinks back on "the three D's" that then dominated the atmosphere of the place: death, denial, and depression. Since then, many of those desolate individuals have passed from the scene.

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<sup>27</sup>Vaillant, *Aging Well*, 207-8.

Most of the men interviewed for this project lived through a turbulent epoch. As young priests or scholastics, their careers straddled the chasm separating the pre- and post-Vatican II Church. "I took my vows in 1962 in the old Church," one man says, "and then all of a sudden everything changed." As young religious, they experienced the turmoil of the late sixties and seventies, including the upending of traditional community life and ministry, and they were the first generation to witness the exit of Jesuits in droves from the Society. What may distinguish this cohort from their caustic elders is that they welcomed many of the changes inaugurated by the council and the Society. For instance, as newly ordained priests, most of them embraced reforms that transformed the liturgy. They too could claim, "This is not the Society I joined," but they rejoiced over the break with past practice. A priest describes going to the church on his campus on the Sunday when Mass could be celebrated in English for the first time. "I just stood there and wept," he recounts, "because something I didn't expect to see in my whole life happened. It just overwhelmed me."

Nonetheless, these Jesuits find things to regret in early religious life. If we want to understand how they find tranquility in old age, it is imperative that we grasp that they have not been spared disappointment and trials. Neither dewy naifs nor plaster saints, they are realists seasoned by at least a half century of Jesuit living. Their common experience is that religious life, like any human endeavor, has its stations of the cross. The happiness these elders experience regarding their vocation today has been hard won. But their capacity to cope with life's testing gives credibility and context to the peace they have discovered as old men.

Although their Jesuit formation provided a solid structure, it occurred in isolation from the world they were expected to serve. Perched on hilltops during his first seven years in the Society, a priest of sixty years recalls, "We were so isolated that the sight of a girl was a shock." The fortunate few who studied philosophy in St. Louis on a university campus with lay students prized that experience. But "the scholastic philosophy we got was nothing more than nonsense, especially cosmology," one man says. As scholastics, they also lived in a Society whose attitude toward sex was scarred by embarrassment, revealed by one Jesuit's recollection of exhortations on chastity and on the vows delivered by a novice master who prefaced his remarks by saying, "We have to get this slimy stuff out of the way."

Their years of theology often evoke sharp criticism even today. "Out in the country surrounded by cows" and run by an "old-fashioned faculty," St. Mary's, Kansas, marked "the worst point of my whole Jesuit life," a senior Jesuit says. "I thought it was just awful," adds another who did theology at mid-century in California's Alma College; "and the teaching was poor, particularly in Scripture." "We did have a couple of stars on the faculty" at Woodstock, another contemporary writes, but the state of theology in those times "was very

uneven" and "the faculty was rather stale and static." "The passivity of the whole process could be deadly, and creativity was not encouraged."<sup>28</sup>

If today's Jesuits find tertianship a graced experience, their predecessors were often disappointed. Unless one happened upon a charismatic director, the programs seemed "backward," "child-like," and even "terrible." Tertianship, says a priest in his late seventies, was "the worst year of my life." Early ministry in the years following the council was often marked by turmoil and confusion. One lifelong administrator harks back to his appointment as rector of a large prep school in 1964 at age thirty-five. "Totally unprepared and inexperienced," he says, "I was too young and dumb to know" how to govern. "It was more the executive model of a superior, which we had in those days," and it didn't work. Another man who was assigned to major administrative position in a university only a year after completing graduate school recalls, "I wasn't even closely prepared" to assume the job.

And yet, as a group, these men are not whiners. "I think the Society disappointed me before I got mature enough to understand humanity," one man reflects. "As a young guy, full of idealism and enthusiasm, I saw things then that disappointed me. But by and large, . . . I understand that the Society is a very human organization filled with human people." GC 32's declaration, "'We are sinners,' says it all for me. I love the Society deeply, and I love my life." Does he have any regrets about having joined? "I feel very grateful that things have turned out the way they did," he replies. "I see God's hand" in the events of my life. "I would never have done the things I've done if I hadn't entered the Society."

These individuals share a bone-deep affection for the Society of Jesus. To describe his feeling, an eighty-three-year-old priest recalls a scene from the film *Lawrence of Arabia* in which a Bedouin leader tells Lawrence of Arabia, "'I have been a river to my people.' That's the way the Society has been for me," he says. It "has been like a river to me. It is marvelous." A man seventy years in the order invokes another metaphor: "The Society has been a magnificent mother to me." I have been totally happy, totally happy as a Jesuit, and I feel totally fulfilled. I can hardly talk about it without crying." Another states, "The Society is an inspiration to me. I don't think I could have met more wonderful people or had such incredible experiences" anywhere else. I've met wonderful Jesuits and . . . a ton of lay people and students who are great people. It's been a great experience. It's been hard, but no regrets."

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<sup>28</sup>*Lives of the Georgetown Jesuits, vol. 1, Rev. Gerard J. Campbell, S.J.* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Jesuit Community, 2008), 10; *Lives of Georgetown Jesuits, vol.3, Bodnar, 7.*

## Living with Personal Weakness

"It's been hard." What lies behind that offhand remark? It recalls years of personal struggle—coming to terms with sinfulness, controlling one's worst impulses, and discovering the mystery that encompasses a religious vocation. It attests also to the uncertainty that necessarily accompanies faith, including doubts about God. "When you pray for years and nothing seems to happen," one man says, "you begin to wonder if anyone is there." Hence the oft-repeated plea, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." One priest recalls the troubled decade after Vatican II—"when so many were leaving even after ordination, including many men I respected and still do—I had to reexamine my commitment and articulate why I had no inclination to give it up."<sup>29</sup>

Challenges to one's convictions do not disappear when a person grows old. Not a few Jesuits, shaken by events of more recent years, struggle to maintain trust in the hierarchical Church. "I have never felt about the Church the way I did before John Paul II treated Arrupe and the Society so terribly," a jubilant says. "The future of the Society matters to me," declares another veteran Jesuit. "The Church is important to me, too, but I see that the Church has to undergo a huge transformation. I look at what I think is needed and where we are, and I say to myself, 'only God can do this.'"

The sexual-abuse crisis has taken its toll on all the faithful—clerical and lay, young and old. After fifty years in the Society, one priest declares, "it's the single most discouraging thing I have ever experienced." The scandal taught me that "I was living with an illusion, and it was discouraging to have it stripped away." "When the scandal first broke, I remember walking downtown in my collar," says a venerable ninety-year-old. "I felt that everyone was looking at me, saying, 'There goes one of those guys.'" Jesuits in positions of authority faced the added challenge of addressing the scandal publicly. "It's hard to find words to explain how it hit me," recounts an elderly administrator. At first, "I had this sinking feeling. It was like your closest set of relationships was somehow implicated. Then came the articles in the press, some of which were pretty accurate, but some of them were rags and scurrilous. After a while, how much can you take of this stuff? You just kind of shut down in a way." "But I didn't dwell there too long" because we needed to organize "an open symposium on the issue at our school."

If public disappointments undermine confidence in the Church, personal transgressions subvert trust in self. Looking through the rear-view mirror of life, these Jesuits find plenty to lament. "I made a lot of bad moves in my life," one man says as he ponders his eighty-year history. "I regret a lot of things I did and I am very sorry for them. I have to turn to the mercy of the Lord because some of those decisions were dumb and wrong." Another individual put it this way:

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<sup>29</sup>*Lives of Georgetown Jesuits, vol. 3, Bodnar, 25.*

"The Society has not disappointed me, but the Society has a right to say I disappointed it. I wish I had an unblemished record," he confesses, "but I don't." I have "lots of faults that make me feel unfaithful. I don't feel that my performance and my convictions are always in harmony. That saddens me." Thus another elder observes, "the wisdom of the later years leads to the humble recognition that, in the end, we will be saved by God's fidelity, not by our own."<sup>30</sup>

Struggle with addiction saddles others. "There was a time" early in my career "when I had trouble with alcohol," a man in his eighties reports. "When my drinking got out of hand, I thought, 'Oh, I'm going to really fall into it.'" Fearing what might happen and not wanting "that kind of life," I began going to Alcoholics Anonymous and started the "one-day-at-a-time thing." Like others in recovery, he discovered that God is found not only in success but often even more deeply and authentically in failure.<sup>31</sup>

Even men who count friendship as one of the boons of religious life, sometimes find community living a trial. "There are people in this house that I just can't think well of," one man sighs. "I'm very intolerant. I want to be able—and I'm far from this—to see God in everyone. But I don't see him everywhere. He is there. I know that. I do have the desire but it's squeezed out of me by my less noble instincts." Like every Jesuit, he identifies with St. Paul's cry, "I do not understand my actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

The leisure that comes with retirement provides opportunity to ponder one's past, which can sometimes be a source of temptation. Hence the old face the challenge of letting go of illusions and unrealistic expectations about themselves and others. Men who have borne the burden of responsibility, for instance, are prone to spend years second-guessing their decisions. "There are some things I might have done better," sighs a former provincial, "and maybe in one or two cases—more than that, actually—I hurt some people by moving them when they felt they were capable of staying where they were; they were crushed by it." Another patriarch recounts having been rector of a high-school community in the roiling 1960s. "I finally realized after a couple of years" that the provincial "was sending me some scholastics and expecting me to usher them out of the Society. I still remember a few of those guys. It was a very trying time," he says, replaying the tape again in his head. "I was really unprepared for that sort of thing. My great haunting now, in my old age, is, How many people might I have hurt in those days?"

Vowed life offers both gifts and challenges. If relationships provide many of the joys of a Jesuit vocation, they also bring trials. "What bothers me the most is that I've had patches of infidelity with chastity," one man says. "They're

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<sup>30</sup>Gerald Fagin, "Spiritual Exercises and Later Years," *The Way* 43 (2004): 71.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.



not big deals—not dangerous or bad—but enough that I’m ashamed of myself. Take masturbation, for example. I had never masturbated, but that’s a problem now and then. It’s not chronic and I’m not consumed by it, but I wonder if I’m too cavalier in telling myself that I’m not going to get uptight about it. . . . When I go before the Lord, it’s not what I promised to be and I feel that failure.” No one is immune from falling in love. “I once became involved with a religious sister,” another elder says, and I asked myself, “‘What would it be like to be married?’ She thought the same way. But when I was at a point where I thought I might move in that direction, she was not; and when she was there, I was not.” I have had “the grace to realize that feeling a little lonely sometimes is part of the deal. If you’re celibate, that’s the way it is. Would it have been nice to have married and have a family? It sure would have. It would be wonderful, but that is not for me.”

### **Are You Happy?**

“When I was a novice, we were given a sheet of questions to prepare for the provincial visitation,” a retired priest recalls. “Topping the list was the simple question, ‘Are you happy in your vocation?’ I think that is still the most important question in our declining years.”<sup>32</sup> Despite the challenges of religious life, most of the Jesuits interviewed for this project describe themselves as “content,” “grateful,” and “blessed.” “I’ve got more aches and pains than I’ve ever had in my life,” one elder declares, “but I have never been as content and as peaceful as I am now.” Another says, “There have been many happy times in my life, but none were as tranquil as the present.” What a visitor said of John Henry Newman in his old age can be applied to many of these elder Jesuits: “He looks very aged” and yet has “an air of melancholy, as of one who had passed through terrible struggles, yet of serenity, as of one who has found peace.”<sup>33</sup>

Asked to identify the happiest period in his Jesuit life, a priest residing in an assisted-living center initially names his theology study in Europe five decades earlier. “But if I’m really honest,” he adds, “the happiest time in my life is right now.” Despite a congestive-heart and kidney problems, “If I look at the way things are now—not that everything is going great—somehow I am very, very happy right here, now.” He relates a recent encounter with a cashier in a grocery store. “I don’t know why, but the clerk looked like he was kind of down so I asked him, ‘How are you feeling? Are you okay?’” He replied that he was fine; “so I was wrong. He just hadn’t been paying much attention.” But then” he asked me, ‘And how are you?’” To my surprise, I heard myself say,

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<sup>32</sup>J. Ripley Caldwell, “A Jesuit Who Dared to Retire,” *National Jesuit News*, April/May 1996, 9.

<sup>33</sup>Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 692.

“‘If I were any happier, I would be in heaven!’ It was only a thirty-second exchange,” he says with a laugh, “but it was wonderful.”

Although few men are as elated as this free spirit, a salient feature of their experience is that they are content, a characteristic they share with America’s elderly population at large. Notwithstanding the common assumption that youth is the prime predictor of happiness, new research suggests that life satisfaction often actually increases with age. What accounts for the contentedness that many elders encounter? In part, it is ascribable to the fact that old age is customarily a time for exceptions and exemptions. As one retired Jesuit puts it, “I do what I want and never get bored.”<sup>34</sup> “I am very glad I retired,” says another, who, after a long administrative career, now passes his days reading and reflecting. “I’ve never been lonely. I’ve never been bored.” This is “a time to get it all together, so to speak”—even so “the more I try to get it all together, the more I find that I can’t get it all together!” he says, laughing. In fact, life has become “more of a mystery to me, but at least I have time to think about it. It’s a very blessed time.”

When pressed to explain their satisfaction, they offer varied explanations. The priest who encountered the grocery clerk believes his contentment is partly the consequence of being able to indulge hobbies and interests that he was too busy to pursue during years of public ministry. “Aging has been more of a positive than a negative experience,” a Midwesterner adds, because I live in “a very pleasant community and have friends that I enjoy visiting with who are very supportive.” In a word, I am “leading a very pleasant life.” For me, these really are “the golden years,” he says. I must accept the limitations that come with age, “but am very grateful for everything. As I told the provincial, I think I’m as happy as I’ve ever been.”

The thankfulness attested to by many of these seniors may account for their happiness. As spiritual writers observe, “Contentment with life deepens to the extent that we view our lives with gratitude.”<sup>35</sup> “As I look back, I am almost overcome with gratitude,” an eighty-year-old scholar declares, typically, “and in my room I sometimes cannot help shouting out, ‘Thank you!’ to the Lord.”<sup>36</sup> Reviewing his sixty years in the Society, a high-school teacher says, “The life has been hard sometimes, but it has also been an inspiration. It is nice to be able to say that I am really happy being a Jesuit, and I am happy in what I have done as a Jesuit. Most of all, I am happy that I have tried to share what has made me happy—in terms of living this way of life and the spirituality that feeds it—being able to share that with other people and thus to make them hap-

<sup>34</sup>Caldwell, *ibid.*.

<sup>35</sup>Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Grateful Heart: Living the Christian Message* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 125.

<sup>36</sup>*Lives of the Georgetown Jesuits, Volume 10, John W. O’Malley, S.J.* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Jesuit Community, 2008), 29.

py and fulfilled in their own lives." That God has been guiding their lives is a commonly shared conviction. One fellow ascribes his successful career to his having taken "advantage of God's gifts and the graces that have been given to me and trying to make the best of things. . . . I just feel so grateful. You asked me about joining the Society. It's all in God's plan. I am convinced that I would not be as happy at this time in my life and would not have so many good things to look back on if God hadn't called me to the Society."

A lifting of obligations is also welcomed by men who are still apostolically engaged. A part-time administrator puts it this way, "I like not being responsible for anything. I like not having to continually think about planning ahead or about doing this or that. I like it because it's much harder for me to do those things now. . . . I have enjoyed not being in charge of anything and just saying, 'Yeah, I'm still doing my job and I'm doing a good job and I like what I'm doing.'" Nowadays "other people have the worries, and I kind of like that." "I still serve on a number of boards," an energetic eighty-six-year-old says, "but the nice thing about boards is that you go and you give your suggestions and then you go home and somebody else has to worry about it. . . . I have very few worries, anxieties, and responsibilities. This is a very happy time in my life right now." A high-profile Eastern Jesuit explains, "The best part of aging is that you don't have anything to prove anymore. You've done it, and you have confidence that you have used your life as well as you can. You've not been faithful or excellent all the time, but there is a liberation that comes from not having to prove things."

### **III. The Centrality of Mission in Jesuit Life**

#### **What Gets You Out of Bed?**

If diminished responsibility is welcomed by seniors, rare is the man who is pleased by having none. "I have a life of what we used to call 'regular order,'" a Jesuit in a large university community complains. "Every day is the same, and it's boring." Having no hobbies, no purposeful projects, and no obligations to relieve his days of regular order, he is clearly distressed. "An elderly Jesuit needs a mission," writes Joseph F. Conwell, not simply to feel important, but "to have some sense that he is making a contribution to the common effort of the Society. . . . To be a Jesuit is to be sent" and to possess the sense that one "is helping the work of the Society."<sup>37</sup> Gerontological research supports this assertion and shows that having worthwhile projects is an essential factor in creating happiness. "Commitment to a set of goals provides a sense of personal agency and a sense of structure and meaning to life," one study concludes. Elderly people who have goals connected to self-preservation have lower feelings of control over their life situation, whereas those who have objectives connected to self-

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<sup>37</sup>Conwell, "Living and Dying," 48.

development feel more competent. "Simply having valued goals, independent of past success," is associated with higher life satisfaction.<sup>38</sup> "In retirement," one expert concludes, "creativity, like play, should be a primary goal."<sup>39</sup>

One of the ways in which aging religious remain spiritually and psychically healthy is by remaining apostolic. Accordingly, most Jesuits describe themselves as retired from work but not from ministry. Their activities run the gamut—from saying Mass at a local parish to offering spiritual direction; from visiting fellow retirees in the province retirement center to praying for others. Because we live longer, remaining apostolic is more important today than it was twenty years ago. As one writer says, the principal issue for a spirituality in the past was how to die well as one confronted the ineluctable diminishments of aging. In this new age of prolonged old age, the challenge is "how to live well."<sup>40</sup> One of the ways one lives well is by being meaningfully engaged.

Whatever their age, the centrality of mission pops up frequently in conversation with Jesuits. "I hope to be involved in ministry as long as I can, not only in university or parish work, but in whatever is there," a middle-aged teacher tells me. "I don't look forward to being inactive. I hope that creativity will continue to kick in all the way to the end." Older confrères make the same observation. Looking over his career, a Jesuit intellectual acknowledges that the happiness of his sixty-plus years of religious life is due "more than anything else to my having been productive. I think Sigmund Freud was absolutely right when asked, 'What are the sources of happiness or what makes for happiness?' His reply: *Liebe und Arbeit* (love and work)—to have something you give yourself to and something you can be productive at, for want of a better term, God's grace. I've experienced that for myself."

The importance of meaningful projects is revealed in these Jesuits' responses to the question, "What makes you want to get out of bed in the morning?"<sup>41</sup> The instant answer of an elderly theologian typifies the group: "The work to be done! There is so much that should be done and has to be done and is worth doing. I enjoy doing it. That gets me out of bed," he jokes, "and I often skip the divine office in order to get it done!" He is not alone. "There are so many things I want to do," a still-engaged administrator declares. "I rarely get through the day's agenda because someone is always picking up the phone and proposing new projects. I enjoy what I'm doing and I have plenty to do. I'm never twiddling my thumbs, saying, 'What am I going to do today?'"

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<sup>38</sup>Ed Diener, Eunkook M. Suh, and Richard E. Lucas, "Subjective Well-being: Three Decades of Progress," *Psychological Bulletin* 125 (1999): 276–302.

<sup>39</sup>Vaillant, *Aging Well*, 224–25.

<sup>40</sup>William A. Barry, S.J., "Jesuit Spirituality for the Whole of Life," *STUDIES* 35, no. 1 (2003): 4.

<sup>41</sup>See also Vaillant, *Aging Well*, 5.

Another senior priest cherishes sharing Ignatian spirituality with lay persons. "That gets me up in the morning," he declares. "I like being part of a transformational church. That really does give me energy. What also gets me up in the morning is doing everything I can for a Church that is world-friendly, a Church that is inclusive. I like to be part of that."

A lessening of responsibilities does not mean apostolic interest disappears. "When I wake up, I think about what I'm going to do in the coming day," says an eighty-six-year-old priest who assists part time in a province office. "I say, 'Lord, this is for you. I'll get up to do this today.' That helps motivate me because I'm frequently kind of stiff. I then waddle my way to the shower" and begin my day. "I sometimes wonder if I didn't have this motivation, what would I do?" Laughing, he answers his question, "I'd tend to stay in bed!"

The absence of projects is lamented by others. "It's hard to make your connections and have something to do here," a retirement-center resident says. "Finding an occupation here is a challenge because there are not enough jobs for everybody." But it is essential that you "find an active, useful ministry," even now. Another retiree, responsible for distributing mail to his fellows, tells me, "I like mail day. It occupies the morning for an hour and a half or two hours and in the afternoon for half an hour or an hour." It gives me something to do, he says warmly, and "that I like." "You become a loner," another man warns, "if you don't have things to do or can't put things in your life." The project may be small, but you still need something to live for.

That "something" can be many things. What the seasoned John LaFarge observed fifty years ago still holds true. Old age "should not drive us in upon ourselves. On the contrary, it is the time for going forth and meeting people," especially "those whom you alone can reach. For the older one grows in the service of God, the more accessible one becomes for the young, the troubled, the doubting, the despairing and perplexed. Your advice, your warning, your prophecy, may be lost nearly a hundred times. But that hundredth time, like the slim notches of a Yale-lock key, may mean for another human heart the unlocking of life itself."<sup>42</sup> Thus a former classics scholar writes that "retirement has given me time to engage in [priestly] ministry, my first calling."<sup>43</sup> When he could no longer drive himself on distant supply calls, another retired teacher began to celebrate Mass in black parishes near his residence. Saying Mass for them "was one of the most enjoyable things I ever did."

A highly respected elder speaks of a ministry that is often overlooked by his peers. "I say this kind of gingerly, but there is a kind of nurturing role that you are expected to have, the nurturing role of an older person. You're not the great guru, and you don't have all the answers," he insists, and you need to

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<sup>42</sup>LaFarge, "On Turning Seventy," *America*, Nov. 18, 1961, 45.

<sup>43</sup>*Lives of Georgetown Jesuits, Volume 3, Bodnar, 24.*

“learn when to keep your damned mouth shut. But there is still an expectation that people have, and it is a justifiable expectation. Others look to you for that. Fulfill that role, gently,” he advises. “Don’t disappoint that expectation.”

The old also exercise the ministry of edification, even though they are usually oblivious to the influence they wield. The present generation of Jesuits in their eighties are able to extend this gift on a scale unprecedented in the Society simply because of their numbers. There have never been so many signposts like them in the history of the order. Accordingly, they are quietly observed by everyone—by the middle-aged as models of how to age happily and by the young as exemplars of how to live the life well. Recalling his time in philosophy studies, a young Jesuit tells me, “When they are older, some Jesuits don’t want to get to know the scholastics.” They give the impression that they want simply “to enjoy their lives and not worry about meeting new people.” But Joe (not his real name) was always there and willing to hang out with us. “What struck me about him as a man in his eighties was that he took it upon himself to go around and remember people’s names.” He learned who we were, what provinces we came from, and he even mastered small details about us. Joe “had a desire to get to know people. There was a real openness and attention to other people, good qualities that a spiritual director should have.”

Elders have unique gifts to bestow on their fellow religious as “keepers of meaning,” to use Vaillant’s term. “One of the tasks of a Keeper of Meaning is to convey to the young that old age is meaningful and dignified. If the task of adults is to create biological heirs, the task of old age is to create social heirs.” One of the secrets to healthy aging is generativity, that is, providing for future generations; seniors who provide this service for the young have happier lives than those who don’t.<sup>44</sup> Carl Jung said much the same thing when he observed, “A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning to the species to which he belonged. The afternoon of life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life’s morning.”<sup>45</sup>

Hence the Society’s practice of placing a senior priest on a formation staff. “He was a great model for me as a young Jesuit during those novitiate years,” a scholastic says of an elderly priest in his community. “I remember going in to him a few times and saying, ‘I don’t know. I’m almost ready to throw in the towel.’ He had a way of calming things.” He also had the hindsight that comes from having spent so many years in the Society and from having done so much good for the order. “To hear him in those difficult moments and to grasp the perspective he gave to any situation that we were in gave us a ‘been-there, done-that’ experience.” He had the wisdom to say, “Let’s take a step back

<sup>44</sup>Vaillant, *Aging Well*, 144, 178.

<sup>45</sup>C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1947), 125–26.

and see what's going on." "He's a great example of a man who stays active in the community. I think there are men like that in every community—people we can look to and say, 'Here's a man I can look up to and to whom I can turn for advice.'"

The elderly also minister to their peers by showing them how to negotiate the shoals of old age. "It's good living here in this community," one octogenarian says. "I see some people that are wonderful examples of aging well. There are some who have been very cheerful, even towards the end. That has influenced me." "I would like to think," another senior says, "that when I am old people will not want to avoid me. We all know folks who, unfortunately, end up that way." Everyone flees them at recreation and meals. "A great role model was Jimmy Martin, who was at Georgetown and died at age 104. He was the oldest Jesuit in the Society then. To the day he died, other Jesuits would say, 'Jim, come on over to our table.'"

Serious illness does not extinguish the desire for ministry. "I'm old and I'm worn out," a seventy-five-year-old informs me, and because of kidney disease, "I'm going to die sooner rather than later." But since "I've still got some work left in me and I have a lot of mental energy," I want to do some writing. "At our last account of conscience," my provincial said, "I want you to work on that book.' So I've got a mission." A Jesuit dying of cancer says, "I've never been at a loss, thinking, 'What am I going to do with this day?' Rather, 'I ask, 'Where is God going to meet me today?'" That is how I dealt with treatment this past year. I'm not used to being sick, and I am not used to being in a hospital." Because of surgery and chemotherapy, "I've certainly been slowed down a bit compared to what I ordinarily do, but I'm not slowed down totally. I have the ability to keep working and things need to get done. I still write books, and I'm still giving talks," he says. "Whatever I can do, I do. I enjoy my work," but it is "not the source of my value. I've talked about this so often to other people that I really think I drink it in too for myself. If I have the ability to work, I think I should, and that's what keeps me going right now." One of the great graces of my life is the La Storta experience of the Father and Jesus together saying to me, as to Ignatius, "'We want you to serve us.' And so I say in reply, 'Well, okay, here I am, and whatever that service means now is where I am. I'm here and I'm glad you want me to serve.' It's simply surrender and giving over and waiting and doing what I can do."

As his future gets shorter, a man's mission need not be grand in order to bring satisfaction to himself and benefit to others. A Jesuit brother speaks of the delight he derived from mastering computers in his seventies as a high-school guest master. "This assignment particularly pleased me when I got an e-mail from a Jesuit in Hawaii and was able to answer it. . . . A week later I answered

an e-mail from Italy, and I felt like a million dollars to be using the computer at my age."<sup>46</sup>

Projects take many shapes. Asked what activities fill the time they previously devoted to work, retirees often reply, "Reading a book that's got some substance to it." "I've been able to do some good reading in what you might call natural theology," one man says. "This is encouraging because even though other things are declining, my intellectual interest is not." "I like to read," another fellow jokes. "I sometimes think I do more spiritual reading than praying." Others have rediscovered fiction. "For so much of my life, my reading has been almost entirely focused on current stuff, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *America*, *Time* magazine, and the local newspapers," a former college president says. "I hardly ever read novels before. Then last summer I was with a good friend of mine, a doctor, and when I left they gave me *Kristin Lavransdatter* by Sigrid Undset. It's a very spiritual book."

Jesuits whose theological instruction was deficient frequently use their free time for self-instruction. "There was no scriptural education" in our theologate," one man reports. "We had a course in Genesis . . . , consisting of about ten classes, but it was basically" a language class. "When it was done, you took a little test in Hebrew." In our fourth year we had a one-semester course in the New Testament from a very qualified instructor, but he "was terrified he would say something" controversial and be reported to Rome. "What are the psalms about? Who are the prophets and what is their place? There was nothing like that. So anything that I've learned about Scripture, I've had to learn on my own." A rapacious reader in old age, he has become an armchair expert on the Old Testament and, like several elderly priest-readers, is a favorite homilist at community liturgies.

## Praying for the Society

The Jesuit activist and writer John LaFarge, reflecting on turning seventy, sagely concluded, "Old age is the time for hidden charity: a good word spoken here and there, a quiet service performed, visits to those in suffering, visits to others of the same age period whose predicament you can understand."<sup>47</sup> For the savvy elder, opportunities for acts of quiet service abound. "It's been wonderful living in this community," a retirement-center resident says, "because there are many ways in which you can make people's days a little bit better—just by a smile or a joke. You have guys here who have really done a life's work. You see that their power is diminishing too, and you feel, boy, I'm part of something that is really wonderful." For my part, another retiree recounts, "I enjoy going downstairs to the infirmary, visiting people, telling a few jokes,

<sup>46</sup>*Lives of the Georgetown Jesuits, Volume 7, Br. Donald J. Dixon, S. J.* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Jesuit Community, 2008), 17.

<sup>47</sup>LaFarge, "Turning Seventy," 243.



kidding them, feeding them, watching a ball game with them. I spend a lot of time in the infirmary. I go down there when they are having meals to have a cup of coffee with them or to talk with them or watch a ball game or occasionally say a prayer with them. I go to their exercise program at ten o'clock. The reason I do it is not because I need the exercise but because I'm doing it with them. I am very pleased with that and they are very welcoming. My day is pretty full. I have things to do almost all of the time."

The official task to which Jesuits no longer engaged in public ministry are entrusted is praying for the Church and the Society. Thus in the list of names that is published each year by each province of the Society, elderly Jesuits retired from the active life have the following phrase inscribed after their name: 'orat pro ecclesia et societate,' meaning that his mission is to pray for the Church and the Society of Jesus. This responsibility is assumed with joy and with seriousness by many men.<sup>48</sup> "I am winding down. This year they changed my status to 'Praying for the Church and the Society,'" a ninety-three-year-old brother says. "I figured in these circumstances praying was a really special responsibility for me" and "I had to do a little more than I used to." So I now spend "about three and a half hours in praying in the day. . . . It's the least I can do."<sup>49</sup>

Anticipating the not-far-distant day when he can no longer direct retreats, another Jesuit in his nineties is equally committed to the ministry of prayer. "I don't want to fill up my days with a hobby" when I move to assisted living, he says firmly. "I want to continue to do something that's constructive and is still part of whatever my mission is at that time." If my mission becomes "praying for the Society and the Church, I will devote not just my own prayer time but special prayer time at different times during the day to pray for the Church, to pray for the Society." I will also pray for the people and places where I once worked, especially St. Ignatius High School and Loyola High School. If that becomes my mission, it "would help me and be most satisfying."

## IV. The Power of Relationships

### Companions in the Lord

If a Jesuit's happiness derives from engaging in worthwhile activity, it is even more dependent upon friendship. It is no accident that what some men find painful about their final years is an absence of social contacts. "How terribly hard it is to be a cripple and alone," one priest confided to his diary. "How seldom—almost never—does anyone of the community come by my room just

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<sup>48</sup>Peter G. Van Bremmen, *Summoned at Every Age* (Ave Maria Press, 2005), 56.

<sup>49</sup>*New England Oral History Program: Volume 21, Bro. Italo A. Parnoff, S.J.* (Weston: Oral History Program, Campion Center, 2006), 22.

for a little friendly word.”<sup>50</sup> Conversely, what is most consoling for older men, as for most people, is maintaining human connections. Even the dying can find peace if surrounded by good company. “What would you say has been the happiest time of your life?” I ask one Jesuit who knows he has only months to live. In a flash, he replies, “Now.” Why? Because of the affection showered upon him by caregivers and a host of friends.

If there is one characteristic of a contented old age, it is relational. “The only thing that really matters in your life,” Vaillant hyperbolizes in the Harvard Study, “are your relationships to other people.”<sup>51</sup> Research on human happiness over the past three decades has made clear that “what the inner mind really wants is connection,” writes David Brooks. The happy life is defined by social interaction. “Joining a group that meets just once a month produces the same increase in happiness as doubling your income.” Research by Daniel Kahneman, Alan B. Krueger, and others demonstrates that “the daily activities most closely associated with happiness are social—having sex, socializing after work, and having dinner with friends. Many of the professions that correlate most closely with happiness are also social—a corporate manager, a hairdresser,” and, we might add, a minister or priest.<sup>52</sup> Some older Jesuits, however, have had to come to terms with negative attitudes toward friendship ingrained in them during formation. “Friendship is so important,” says a man who made his novitiate in the 1940s, but “it was very much discouraged when I was young in the Society.” I remember our novice master “saying that he never went out of his way to make a friend.” That “God-and-myself attitude is not Catholic” and it’s crazy, he says, but Jesuits of that era “were so uptight about particular friendship.”

Social contact also assists perseverance. Asked what accounts for their having remained Jesuits, the old offer many explanations. “God’s grace” is usually first on the list. “Looking back, I see God’s hand in my life,” says one. “I am convinced there are no coincidences. . . . God uses all the things that happen in your life. I’m convinced that God is really trying to direct me.” “There is such a thing as a call,” one individual says flatly, “and it’s not rooted in me. It’s rooted in God. That is an outrageous thing to claim but I believe it. Show me something better!” “In my prayer life, I concluded this is where I should be,” says another. “My relationship with Jesus has been the lodestar for me,” another confides. “This is where he wants me. I’ve been tempted as every person

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<sup>50</sup>Barry Martinson, *Celestial Dragon: A Life and Selected Writings of Fr. Francis Rouleau* (Taiwan, 1998), 272–73.

<sup>51</sup>Joshua Wolf Shenk, “What Makes Us Happy?,” *The Atlantic*, June 2009. [Http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/what-makes-us-happy/7439](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/what-makes-us-happy/7439) .

<sup>52</sup>David Brooks, “Annals of Psychology: Social Animal,” *The New Yorker*, Jan. 17, 2011, 28–29. See also David Brooks, *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* (New York: Random House, 2011), xi.

is, but none of it ever made sense when examined in terms of the Spiritual Exercises." Many ascribe their staying to fruitful ministry, declaring, "I've loved what I was doing," and "the things I've done in the Society have been fun and successful."

Jesuits repeatedly discern a connection between perseverance and companionship. "I don't think I would have stayed in the Society if I hadn't had people that mattered to me," an eighty-three-year-old declares. I survived because "I did choose very good friends, and I needed them to help me discover who I am. We learn about ourselves from the people we associate with." Asked why he remained Jesuit, a former provincial says, "I think companionship has been part and parcel of it. I've always had the strength and support of Jesuit companionship. I loved the men with whom I worked." But perseverance was not solely the consequence of good fellowship.

I think it's where God still wants me. I do really feel like this is where God would have me. And I continue to get feedback that seems to tell me that I am where I should be. People keep telling me that, saying, "You are this kind of person. You are this for me. We're grateful for what you have to give." You have to drink in what they tell you, and it really does continue to feed your life.

A theme that emerges over and over again is the value of interpersonal connections developed during the years of formation. A West Coast Jesuit describes his years of philosophy as a time of great struggle but also a period when lifelong friendships were forged. "It was there that I formed relationships," he tells me, "and it is relationships that make the difference." I have learned "the wisdom of the African saying 'I am because we are.' I am part of a community. I am not an 'I' but am related to everything else and to everyone else. I feel that in my bones. 'I am because we are. And because we are, I am.'"  
A retired theologian also attributes his remaining in the Society to his companions. "We lived through one of the incredibly great periods in the history of the Church," he says, but "we were equipped to deal with it. And that wasn't due just to what we were taught. It was also a consequence of who were with us." "My closest friends were inspirations," says a retired high-school teacher, recalling four deceased classmates. Losing Tom was "like losing my right arm." Of another peer, he says, "I called twice a week to run things by him. When I was upset, he would give me very good advice and tell me to calm down before I acted. These guys truly moved me, inspired me, helped me along the way. Those are great people, and I miss them big time."

Several Jesuits see a nexus between social relationships and apostolic success. "I get more out of discussion with friends than I do out of almost any other source," a much acclaimed scholar insists. A longtime administrator says much the same thing. "As I look back, I think one of the reasons why I've kept relatively sane in the midst of a pretty hectic schedule is that I've maintained

good personal relationships with people—Jesuits, family, friends, colleagues,” he says. “I really enjoy the times spent with folks celebrating, having dinner, or whatever. Talk about growing old—you need to keep your relationships strong. One of the saddest things is when people say, ‘I have no more friends.’ I don’t think we Jesuits have that problem as much.”

Not a few seniors count women among their closest intimates. “As a young man, I was very shy with women,” one reports, but “today I have many women friends who are the joy of my life.”<sup>53</sup> “I’ve been amazed at the group of women that I’ve come to know,” another Jesuit says. “Some of them are dead. They are part of what I call my ‘communion of saints.’ I know it sounds corny. I’ve had good women friends and good women models in my life—better, in fact, than the men in our family.” A former pastor adds, “I had a couple sister friends, one of whom died about five years ago. We were really very close friends. Everything was on the up-and-up. We could go out to dinner and that sort of stuff.”

The maintenance of a social network is no less crucial for those who are fully retired. Asked what matters most to him now, an eighty-year-old former teacher says, “Community life is the most important.” The physical discomforts of old age are not easily borne, a retiree in a large community concedes after spending several nights sleeping in a recliner because arthritic-hip pain kept him from bed. What sustains me through the long nights, this congenial Jesuit says, is the prospect of the next day’s conversation with fellow Jesuits. “I very much look forward to the evening, to drinks and dinner. I don’t care how goofy the conversation is. You’re still with people and there is a social interchange that is absolutely necessary,” he insists. “Those are important times in my day. It’s a time of real social intercourse, and I have to have some kind of contact with others. Just those times and the fact that I know I live among people are sufficient to keep me going. This is why people who stick to themselves get a little odd.”

As the conversation continues, it becomes increasingly apparent to me why this graybeard is regarded as wise by his fellows. “Why do old men get together to play bocce ball?” he poses rhetorically. “It is not swinging the damned ball. It’s social contact and talking with your buddies that counts. Or take the guys going down to the coffee shop. It’s all these odd things that old people do. You go sit on the bench and talk to your friends as they come by. What do you talk about? The same things you’ve been talking about your whole life!” Jesuits in assisted-living facilities have frequent occasion to share the park bench with old acquaintances. “I have rekindled friendships here with my classmates” and with old high-school chums, one man says. “Gosh, I love to be around all these guys.”

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<sup>53</sup>*Lives of Georgetown Jesuits, Volume 1, Campbell, 27.*

My “most satisfying activity is talking to people, whether it’s students or faculty or other Jesuits, on a deep level,” a respected Midwesterner declares. “That’s why I thoroughly loved being a superior.” The men “let you into their lives” and hence the privilege of “working with them on their interior level is tremendous. I still feel that with people in spiritual direction or in semi-counseling situations.” In fact, the most satisfying activity in my older years is “talking about God with people and talking about themselves at their deepest level and how that is interacting with God.” I don’t mean “in a pious way, but in a way that’s below the surface of things. That I like to do, I feel good about doing it, and I feel satisfied about doing it.”

That these Jesuits find conversation intrinsic to their ministry is not surprising. It was through dialogue that Ignatius drew the first companions to himself in Paris. And Jerome Nadal, who explained the Constitutions to the early Society, insisted that loving engagement with others is integral to the order’s ministry.<sup>54</sup> “I imagine life in the Kingdom as a kind of on-going and familiar conversation,” says a Jesuit who likens his chats with friends to the ante-chamber of heaven. “I’m a good conversationalist. That’s what I really know how to do,” he says. I am also “a foodie” and “I eat out with a lot of people.” “I’m very much aware that these events are sacramental, and I think they may well be Eucharistic too.” Heaven, he foresees, will be “a continuation of the good times that I’ve enjoyed here. One of the reasons why ministry—including praying for the Society and the Church—is satisfying is because it is other-directed. “I love working with my people,” says a Jesuit who is retired from the classroom to office work. “I have never hated going to work. Never. I am lucky. People are just good, and I have fun with them.”

If there’s one thing that thwarts relationships, it is alcoholism, which, like any addiction, leaves its victim narcissistic and “stuck on the holy music of self.”<sup>55</sup> Drinking alienates one’s companions, thereby isolating a man from the very thing he needs most: connection with others. According to the Harvard Study, alcohol abuse consistently predicts unsuccessful aging, in part because it damages a person’s social supports.<sup>56</sup> “Dealing with alcoholics was a learning experience” for me, a former rector explains. At first, I figured their drinking was “none of my business,” but then you “discover that the man who’s drinking is also swearing at other people.” Drunkenness usually wreaks havoc in the lives of everyone touched by it. “We had four active alcoholics in a fairly small community,” a Jesuit says of a high school in which he worked soon after ordination. “All four were elderly, either in their late seventies or eighties. It was grim. They depressed the whole community.” “It’s devastating,” another con-

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<sup>54</sup>John W. O’Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 111.

<sup>55</sup>David Carr, review of Bill Clegg, *Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man*, *New York Times Book Review*, June 27, 2010.

<sup>56</sup>Vaillant, *Aging Well*, 13.

firms, recalling an instance when “the whole community petitioned the provincial” to remove a drinker. They got help for the man, and “he’s better off now and so is the community.”

### “I’m the Only One Left”

For young men, the departure of friends from the Society or the death of a cherished mentor is a keen loss. For the older Jesuit, such sacrifices occur with disarming frequency. “Just in this last year,” a World War II veteran says, “I lost five people who were in my company and whom I knew intimately in Europe.” The same thing is happening among my high-school classmates—“They are dying off.” All of my siblings are now gone, which is “a difficult thing to accept.” “There are two things about aging that I like least,” he summarizes. First are “the increasing physical limitations,” and second is that “I don’t like that I’m losing my best friends all the time.” His refrain is repeated by others. “It was tough seeing both my brother and sister die,” a man eighty years old says. “And in the past year, two of my best lay friends died of cancer.” Jesuit cronies too are fast disappearing. “Starting back in the late sixties, we had a group of about fifteen guys who would go on vacation together in the summer,” he says wistfully. “Well, that fifteen is down to about four or five.”

One never fully adjusts to the passing of familiars. “I think the thing that surprised me the most and that I found hardest was losing my friends,” a seasoned priest of eighty-six confesses. “I never had a problem with that before. Now I’m in the position where I can say that all the people I could confide in and really talk to and who I, in turn, would listen to, are gone.” Reaching across his desk, he retrieves a fading photograph. “This is a picture that I came across recently.” Taken in 1942, it shows himself and thirty-six scholastics in their early twenties dressed in cassocks and wearing birettas. Rediscovery of that image “really shocked me,” he says, because “they’ve all gone to heaven. This guy left the Society; that guy is dead now, and so forth. I am the sole survivor of that group. I am it. You expect that to happen after a while. It’s logical, it can’t be any other way; that’s the price you pay for living so long.” Nevertheless, the impact of the losses came as “a surprise to me. We are given a lot of courses in the Society, but we’re never given a course in how to age. It would be a good idea to do that.” However, he says chuckling, “you don’t know who’s going to make it and who will benefit from it.”

Although the falling away of friends is one of the burdens of old age, none of these Jesuits was wracked with grief over the departures. As in many areas of life, faith tempers and contextualizes misfortune. “We used to vacation together every year for twenty-five years,” an old-timer says, remembering his dead brother. “People say, ‘It must be tough,’ and I tell them, ‘Well, I’m sure going to miss Jim. There’s no doubt about that.’ But he’s better off than I am, and I would not wish him back!” That’s also the way I feel” about friends who have died. “Ultimately, going to God is what it’s all about—coming from God

and going to God." Losing loved ones is "frightening and disconcerting," another man confirms, "but that's where our faith comes in." Besides, I am consoled thinking "about what wonderful lives they've led and the good families they've left behind."

The shrinking of one's circle underscores the singular importance of maintaining social contacts. While some old Jesuits resign themselves to soldiering on without support, others creatively seek opportunities to deepen surviving relationships. Thus, while grieving the departure of siblings, one long-liver works "to keep in touch with my nieces and nephews." He is also forging new acquaintances, noting happily that "a number of families have kind of adopted me." Looking back over his life, a seventy-three-year-old says, "If there's one piece of advice I'd give to younger Jesuits, it would be to make an effort—I know it's not always easy—to cultivate new friendships. Don't put all your eggs in one basket by limiting your relationships to just a couple of people, because they won't be around forever." Another Jesuit, while lamenting the demise of contemporaries, finds a lesson in their passing. "I wouldn't want to be living surrounded just by my peers," he says candidly, "because I don't like them all. I've realized the difference between friends and brothers in the Society. I have a lot of friends and many more brothers." Like other well-adjusted seniors, he has successfully created a wide social network among co-workers and the young Jesuits with whom he lives in a large community. "The buoyancy and fun of youth," he declares, "is great."

## Connecting with the Younger Generation

The Jesuit writer James Martin has observed that "the Society of Jesus is one of the last places in this country where you still live with your brothers, fathers, and grandfathers."<sup>57</sup> The relationships produced by that arrangement are complex and varied as well as stressful and deeply rewarding. Some older men have no significant links with the junior Jesuits with whom they live. Others, particularly those who mentor scholastics, know them nearly as well as they do their own contemporaries. Retired oldsters who long ago lost contact with the Society's newest members often develop close ties late in life with novices on experiment in their province infirmary and assisted-living center.

While not without criticism of the young, most elders who rub shoulders with novices and scholastics are unsparing in their praise of them. "I am mightily impressed by young Jesuits," a priest of advanced age says. "Some are pains in the ass and babies, but so are the older group." "They are courageous in throwing their lot in with a profession that doesn't enjoy the prestige" the priesthood possessed when I was their age. "But these young guys are not ashamed of being a priest. They love the service they can give people." "They

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<sup>57</sup>James Martin, *In Good Company: The Fast Track from the Corporate World to Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 2000), 126.

are much more immersed in contemporary culture," adds a popular spiritual director. "I don't find the current culture very supportive of religious life the way culture was some forty years ago." How they manage to negotiate that, I don't know. "It's a real act of faith. I am impressed by their courage." The contrast between generations inevitably elicits comparisons. "They are more affectively demonstrative" than we were, one man observes, and "they tend to be much more open about confiding in friends." "I'm very enthused about the young people we have," another old-timer declares. "They love the Society and are engaged with it. I love their resilience, their confidence, their courage." "I appreciate their frankness about homosexuality," still another says, "and about being gay." "Some of them are simply extraordinary men," a Jesuit professor sums up, "and they have no idea of how extraordinary they are."

Veteran Jesuits cite benefits they've garnered in this winter-spring exchange. "They've kept me optimistic," a busy eighty-year-old says. I am fundamentally a hopeful person, "but they've certainly helped keep me that way. I believe that young folks have fresh visions and dreams. I find that very helpful." Paradoxically, contact with the young helps elders accept the marginalization that inevitably comes with the passing of the years. If mature Jesuits often stand as models for younger confreres, the young unknowingly provide that same service for the old. "I like the young and am inspired by them," says a high-school teacher who has known scores of scholastic regents over the years. Not only is there "a happiness and an optimism about them," but an admirable "acceptance of poverty that edifies me." A veteran retreat director is impressed by "the ease and acceptance" with which one of his new co-workers relates to lay colleagues. "I didn't grow up that way," he says, but this young priest "moves into it quite readily. It's good to see somebody who can do it, and he does it well." A man who early in his career helped staff a collegiate program traces his receptivity to change and his facility for understanding others to the scholastics with whom he once lived. "I was earlier trained that a Christian should always first try to see what's positive in a situation or a person and only after that to raise objections and questions. But too often we start with the negative and that's all we stay with." We have to be open to new possibilities, he insists, and I learned that from the young Jesuits with whom I worked. "These are committed young people, and therefore there is something I can learn from them."

Old-timers who reach out to protégées seem less inclined to fret about the future of religious life. "What I've learned" from our scholastics, a senior priest says, "is that God is really at work in the Society in these young people." While "I don't need them in the sense that I want to spend a lot of time with them," adds another, I do "care about them" and wish to provide them "support and encouragement." But the fundamental reason why I like them is that "they are the future and through them I reach out into the future." What I have learned through my acquaintance with young Jesuits, says one veteran, is "to question what I take for granted as the parameters of life." My categories and



values “may not be adequate to life today.” But theirs is “a world of potentials that reach far beyond what I grew up with, and while there are down sides to those potentials, I have no doubt they’re the ones who are going to have to deal with the ups and the downs of their world. And thank God for them. In a way it frees me. It frees me from thinking that I have to solve those problems because I’m not in a position to solve them, and they are.”

## V. Religious Experience in the Life of the Elderly

### The Greatest Gift

Although the Harvard Study researchers discount religion’s role in fashioning a contented old age, other scholars are less dismissive. In fact, according to one study, the “preponderance of evidence suggests that religion is associated with mental-health benefits, especially when religiosity is measured by actual religious behavior.” If religious experience “buffers the effects of some stressors on depression,” it also can provide “a sense of meaning in daily life.”<sup>58</sup>

One need not strain to persuade Jesuits that this is true. “The one thing that is really important at this stage of my life,” a priest in his late seventies says, “is that I’ve become more religious.” No matter who says Mass or how odd his presiding style, for example, “I get an awful lot out of the liturgy.” That faith looms large in shaping a Jesuit’s ability to find happiness and contentment is a commonplace. The way an individual has been molded by Ignatian spirituality, a Jesuit psychologist writes, is a major determinant of how he spends his time in the autumn of his life. Does he view being elderly as an opportunity to deepen his spiritual life? Does he welcome the time to read more books, write letters to friends, and contact people whom he may have neglected over the years? Does he use the time to explore his hidden talents or just watch twenty-four-hour news shows that repeat the same stories and weather reports hour after hour?<sup>59</sup> “If you want to live this life, you better pray,” a respected elder advises. “See if you can develop a taste for it,” so that “you don’t go there only because you’re obliged to pray.” “Prayer and the time that’s spent in personal spiritual growth” have become even more important to me, a former administrator insists, “whether it’s reading the breviary, praying, or being present to others and helping them. Those are the things that sustain and make life manageable.”

Prayer is a *sine qua non* of religious life in all its stages and it is no less essential in old age. The writer John LaFarge believed that “the latter years are a time when we simply allow ourselves to become more familiar with God [and]

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<sup>58</sup>Ed Diener, Eunkook M. Suh, and Richard E. Lucas, “Subjective Well-Being: Three Decades of Progress,” *Psychological Bulletin* 125 (1999): 276–302.

<sup>59</sup>Thomas A. Caldwell, “Jesuit Who Dared to Retire,” *National Jesuit News*, April/May 1996, 9.

let ourselves grow closer to that source of life . . . toward which we are inexorably moving." Prayer becomes "more and more a part of the texture of our lives."<sup>60</sup> Thus, a seventy-two-year-old declares, "This is a graced, sacred time. It is an invitation from God to spend time in gratitude."<sup>61</sup> "What matters most to me now," another man echoes, "is feeling close to God and staying close to God and knowing that is the most important thing that I can do." A third Jesuit puts it this way: "I think of God more prayerfully, and I think of God much, much more than at any other time in my life now that I don't have a lot of other things to worry about, and I am so grateful for that. I am trying to be as close to God as I can." I am also aware "that it's the greatest gift I have." "I don't know how many days remain" for me, a ninety-year-old says, and so "I treasure each one."

Reflection on aging necessitates reflection on dying. For those of advanced years, that prospect can be welcoming. "I can't wait to die. I am looking forward to it without any fear at all," declares a man in his ninety-first year. "It can't come soon enough as far as I'm concerned. I am so eager to behold the Trinity, *facies ad faciem*. I am eager to do that." The desire for intimacy does not mean that everyone is preoccupied with crossing the river Styx, however. "I do fear it," one man admits, "but that doesn't do me any good." Instead, "I say to the Lord, 'I'm afraid and so I have to have confidence in you.'" A retired pastor offers an urban metaphor to explain his attitude. At my age, there comes the inevitable "realization that we're getting close to the end of the trolley line," he says. "There are only a couple more stops before the trolley comes to a stop. But to tell the truth, I don't find it hard" to accept that. Nor does he spend a lot of time worrying about his mortality. Like men awaiting the dawn of a new day, these veterans know death is on the horizon but their gaze is not fixed on the skyline. "When friends die, I find myself thinking, 'I better get all my stuff in order,'" a busy octogenarian admits. But then I say, 'Well, not yet!' So I do think of it from time to time, especially when I'm doing funerals, but I regard death in a positive, peaceful way." "I've tried to imagine it," an eighty-four-year-old priest says, "but I can't. How can you? I don't brood on it," and, "I don't think I'm scared of death. I'm more intrigued, not by it, but by what happens next."

"My view on death is that we make too much of it," a retired theologian insists. "For too long we've been clinging to a view of death as a hovering, terrible presence with the result that we're ignoring the Easter message. It hasn't penetrated us that Christ destroyed death for us." Consequently, although an aging body and failing memory remind me daily of my impermanence, "I don't think about my mortality a lot. If I am diagnosed with stage-one cancer tomorrow, I might say, 'Okay, let's try something.' But if it's more serious than that, I would conclude, 'That's fine, but I don't want any of these treatments.' Fear of death?" he asks. "What Jesus came for was to liberate us from that." "I have no

<sup>60</sup>LaFarge, "On Turning Seventy," *America*, Nov. 18, 1961, 242.

<sup>61</sup>"Aging Gracefully in the Spirit," *The Southern Jesuit*, Fall 2010, 21.

fear of death now," says another Jesuit of that generation. "And I don't know how I will handle it, but I can do something now in the way I live my life."

Years spent mastering the Ignatian way of proceeding seem eventually to bear fruit. "When things tempt me or challenge me or make me fearful," a Jesuit says, "I turn to a prayer for indifference and the Lord delivers me from whatever I'm afraid of." It is significant that "the first words the Resurrected Jesus says to his disciples are 'Peace be with you' and 'Fear not.' Before they even open their mouths, he tells them that. So over the years, I have come to realize that fear in our hearts is precisely the Lord knocking on the door of our hearts." He continues, "When I begin to get anxious or fearful, like facing death, I think, 'Okay, I am not facing death right now.' Whatever the fear is, I pray for indifference about it. The Lord doesn't want us to live in fear. That doesn't mean we're not going to live with difficult and negative things and with suffering too. But we don't have to be fearful, and that is incredible. The Ignatian understanding of indifference has become "a little secret" of my life and ministry, he confides, "and I carry it with me in my little toolbox of prayer."

Fear did not preoccupy the three dying Jesuits whom I encountered. One, asked if his way of praying had shifted since he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, says, "No, I don't know that is has." But he then observes—"except that I'm much more conscious of surrendering and giving myself over. That means everything to me. I'm just pretty much there now." Another individual approaching death peacefully informed me that he was now experiencing "less searching" for God on his part "and more openness to a God who searches for me."

## **Changing Prayer Life**

Confidence as life comes to an end, while certainly a grace, seems also the result of fidelity to prayer. But that fidelity is not easily won. Many experience the inevitable waning of the spiritual enthusiasm and freshness they enjoyed as younger men, a phenomenon noted both by masters of prayer and by modern neuroscientists. As Andrew B. Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania has written, by age fifty "we are less likely to elicit the kinds of peak or transcendent experiences that can occur when we are young. Instead, we are more inclined to have subtle spiritual experiences and refinements of our basic belief." Observing this waning of "sensible devotion and inward life" in himself, John Henry Newman believed "old men are in soul stiff, as lean, as bloodless as their bodies except so far as grace penetrates and softens them." Thus he prayed for ardor, noting, "In asking for fervour, . . . I am asking for the gift of prayer."<sup>62</sup> Echoing Newman, an elderly Jesuit says, "I wish I could pray more easily. I'm always talking about affective prayer with others," he confesses, "but I don't experience it much myself. I wish I could, though. I pray for it,

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<sup>62</sup> Andrew B. Newberg, cited in Brooks, *Social Animal*, 341; John Cornwell, *Newman's Unquiet Grave: The Reluctant Saint* (Continuum, 2010), 214.

but my prayer still doesn't seem very affective. I would like to pray better before I die." And still, he does pray.

After nearly seventy years in the Society, "the distractions are still there," a veteran spiritual director says, and "there's a dullness to prayer many times" that finds me "shaking the hour glass to see whether it's stuck." Nonetheless, my meditation has become "much deeper, quieter" and my prayers are filled by a desire to "be sorry, to ask pardon, to praise, to thank, and to love." A one-time provincial offers a telling insight. "My prayer is not full of lights and flowers, and my prayer is sometimes sleepy. But I've come to judge my prayer on whether I do it or not. It's when I don't do it, when I don't waste time with God, that I feel bad about my prayer. Otherwise, I just say, 'Okay, whatever happens, happens. Here I am, and You're in charge.'"

When asked if their prayer has changed over the years, these Jesuits responded affirmatively. In part, this transformation mirrors the postconciliar Society's recovery of a spirituality that is more personal, integrated, and humane. But it seems also to be the consequence of continuous practice. "I am more familiar with God" now than I was earlier in my religious life, a veteran high-school teacher says. "I am more open to prayer now." "I have a much more loving and accepting sense of God who is hardly a judge and is much more a companion." About to celebrate his eightieth birthday, one man believes he now makes better annual retreats. Why? Because he realizes each retreat may be his last. "I have a deep-down trust in God," another veteran volunteers. I am by nature a buoyant person, but I believe that my native optimism "has gradually morphed into trust. . . . I just take for granted that I am with God and that God is all around me. So I can say, 'Thank you,' or, 'Help me.' It's easy."

My contemplation nowadays is "more centered on the way I feel about things," a man sixty-five years in the Society says, "and it's also much more centered in my sense of gratitude. I'm almost ashamed of how good life has been to me, and I almost apologize for it. Why did You do this for me? I can't explain it." "My earlier prayer, especially during the Spiritual Exercises, centered on Jesus Christ, explains a seventy-year veteran of religious life, but "that isn't my experience now." "My whole daily prayer is Trinitarian. I don't understand it, but I trust the Lord is there. I believe the Holy Spirit is now my spiritual father. I don't know if others experience that," he says, but I am "very tranquil and peaceful when it's time to pray. I look forward to it."

Their ways of praying are as varied as the individuals with whom I spoke, and yet there are some commonalities. Many seniors report their mental prayer has become less formal and less structured, on the one hand, and, on the other, more relational and more Scripturally based. Like Ignatius, for whom spiritual reading was the key to conversion, their prayer is nourished by *lectio divina*. "Often enough now, I pull down off the shelf" a well-worn volume and turn to a favorite section, one man says. I read it very slowly and that "stirs up

the heart." When distractions or sleepiness intrude, another says, "I'm back to saying the rosary. But I'm not so much paying attention to the words as saying a mantra over and over again and simply being in the presence of God." The practice of prayerful reflection on one's life brings consolation to others. I use "the prayer of personal reminiscence," one Jesuit says. "I do this without any regrets and without dwelling on the old days but reminiscing on things that happened in my life where I think God was present. I thank the Lord for the times he has been present and is present in my life now." This man has also joined a prayer group with several lay people at his high school. "It's one of the high points of my week," he says. "Twenty years ago, I would have thought, Oh yuck! God, now it means so much to me, and it's very strengthening."

### Finding God in All Circumstances

Among the surprises encountered in these conversations was how much Jesuit prayer is ordered horizontally as well as vertically. Although the gifts of high contemplation are not alien to them, many Jesuits discover God in worldly activity. This should not cause astonishment, for Ignatian spirituality is dedicated to the discovery of the sacred in the secular. When he traveled through Europe in the sixteenth century explaining the Constitutions to the members of the nascent Society of Jesus, Jerome Nadal stressed the mutual causality of prayer and ministry for Jesuits. "The prayer of the Society," he insisted, "assists execution"; conversely, execution or ministry assists prayer.<sup>63</sup> Hence Ignatius's exhortation in the Constitutions to "find God in all things," a theme echoed by the order's Thirty-first General Congregation. "We are strengthened and guided towards action in our prayer while our action in turn urges us to pray." In a word, "We pray as we work."<sup>64</sup>

This is as true for retirees as for those caught up in apostolic labor. An eighty-one-year-old who has spent sixty-three years in the Society explains. "I have had long, dry experiences of the God Who Is Silent," he writes, "all those meditations when I kept looking at the clock: Will this hour never be over? What is it that you want of me, God?" Lately, however, "I have seen the light. Better still, I have heard the voice, God's voice, and my meditations are completely different. I still look at the clock; that has not changed. But now the questions are: What more do you have to say to me, God? Will you not let up for a minute?"

What accounts for the transformation of his prayer? "It seems that retirement has given me the leisure finally to understand that God never stops talking to me," he says. But it's more than that. After pondering still one more

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<sup>63</sup>Joseph F. Conwell, *Walking in the Spirit: A Reflection on Jerónimo Nadal's Phrase "Contemplative Likewise in Action"* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2003), 53.

<sup>64</sup>*Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), 139.

time Ignatius's meditation on the Incarnation, he understood it as if for the first time: "God is involved in this world." "Now the light has dawned and the voice is loud and clear. God speaks to me every moment in multiple ways on every subject under the sun." As a result, the subject matter for prayer "comes from the world in which I live each day—from the media, from social interaction," and the trifles of daily living. "I might even be accused of making the daily *New York Times* or CNN a fifth Gospel," he declares. "I no longer need to go aside and rest awhile to hear God's voice. It is there constantly, bidding me to respond." This means that "I have never been more fully alive, when one would think I should be counting my last hours. At some point all those prayers I uttered over the years to the Holy Spirit to teach me how to pray were answered."<sup>65</sup>

If contemplation becomes more simple and more spontaneous after persistent practice, it also occurs in the midst of activity. "The Lord's there. He's present," a jack-of-all-trades Jesuit says. "He is always present. After many years of prayer and discernment and so forth, you get to the point where it's quite simple or facile to turn to the Lord in your life, to the One that you have come to know and love." That is really what I like the most about aging, he says. "It is not complicated, and it's not that you have to spend hours in meditation." Other seniors report similar experiences. "I don't go around bathed in the presence of God by any means," an academic says. "But in the most pedestrian circumstances, I will think of God's presence and pray briefly. It's day-by-day, and it happens a lot of times during the day." For my part, "I do nothing other than say, 'I'm glad I'm in your presence.' I would never have thought this way of praying was sufficient in years past."

Seasoned religious find the Lord in unlikely places. An elderly priest whose ministry demands frequent travel is drawn to a version of the Jesus Prayer in which he says, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me." Wherever I am, "it clicks me right away into a sense of being meshed with God," he says. "I can be in the departure lounge in the airport and decide to say the Jesus Prayer and I'm immediately into it." Or when driving to a supply call seventy-five miles away from home, "I always say the Jesus prayer all the way down and all the way back because I have the time."

It is striking how much people enter into the prayer of Jesuits. "When I sit down to begin my formal prayer, usually in the morning after breakfast," an aged scholar says, "I often find myself thinking of folks I want to pray for. At first, I thought this was a distraction, and then I learned this was a good way to begin my prayer. This motivates me and gives focus to what I'm doing, and is a natural lead-in to whatever Scripture I'm praying about that day." Since I'm often "dealing with people and my peers on a regular relational basis," a superior says, I am often "praying through and with people." One of the Jesuits in

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<sup>65</sup>Frank Moan, "Faith in Focus: Finally, God's Voice," *America*, Feb. 9, 2009, 28–29.

our community had a heart attack a few days ago and so “I feel I’m praying the week through him.”

“I can’t explain the good things that happen to me spiritually,” a retiree observes, “simply because I’ve met certain people.” Another man puts it this way: “When I’m praying I’m yearning for other people more than I’m thanking God for a wonderful day.” “I have a little prayer list here of people who come to me,” a lively septuagenarian tells me, lifting up a three-by-five index card with eighteen names inscribed on it. “I have eighteen intentions that I am praying for today. These are people who come to me and ask for prayers. I want to be available and help them in any way that I can. The older you grow, you can become more available because you have less demands from other sources. God, keep me cheerful. God, keep me available.”

## **Conclusion**

Historians who study the Society distinguish between its letter and its spirit, that is, between the order’s aspirational legislation and its lived reality. They examine, therefore, not only the decrees and documents of the Society but also its living tradition, which is revealed in the way Jesuits live out the institution’s ideals in various times and places. The testimony of the elders interviewed for this project provides a window into that existential reality. Their witness reveals not an imagined or idealized Society but how real Jesuits exist in the real Society and how they labor to grow old gracefully. Although there are few guidelines on the subject of aging in the order, their practice suggests ways that it is successfully achieved.

Their example is valuable on several counts. It is significant, first, because these men are walking a path largely untrod by earlier Jesuits. There certainly have been elderly Jesuits before the present day, but never have there been so many who have lived so long. Even as late as 1900, the average American did not endure beyond his or her fiftieth year. Today the average life span is over seventy-eight. Hence, oldsters of the twenty-first century, in contrast to generations who have gone before, enjoy unprecedented longevity. In a very real sense, therefore, they stand as models where none existed before. We would do well to listen to them.

What do they tell us? First, their experience suggests that many of our assumptions about aging are wrong. These men impart the same message as did Jesus in the Gospel: things are not as they seem. The Reign of God, which the Lord likens to yeast in bread or a treasure in a field, is not always visible. Likewise, the dynamics and reality of aging are usually not apparent to distracted bystanders. For those of us living in an achievement-oriented culture in which worth is determined by what we do rather than who we are, the treasure of a man’s later years often remains opaque. Blinded further by fear of aging and retirement, we fail to perceive what that reality is truly like.

The witness of these elders suggests that later life is, in fact, a time of growth and fresh insight. While being old does not in itself bestow wisdom on a person, viewing the world from the edge of life often does impart knowledge, compassion, and freedom. For many of these Jesuits, their later years—*notwithstanding* the very real limitations that come with aging—are a season of deep contentment. Being happy doesn't mean being elated all the time, but it does signify satisfaction with one's life choices and the ability to conclude life gracefully. Moreover, while much is indeed beyond our control, there are steps we can take to allow grace to find us, whatever our situation—even when facing death.

The lives of the contented elderly underscore the importance of maintaining a social network in one's later years. We humans are made for communion with others. Some men employ retirement as a time to renew their acquaintance with people whom they have neglected over the years. When classmates and other peers are lost to death, old age also becomes an occasion to forge new friendships, even with the young. Although not every senior Jesuit finds himself living with men of the next generation, some do establish relationships with junior Jesuits, thereby discovering that young and old have similar hopes for the Society.

These elders' experience also suggests there is truth to the maxim that a Jesuit never retires. Ceasing to draw a paycheck does not mean that one withdraws from mission. Indeed, having a meaningful project and contributing to the work of the Society is an essential ingredient for happiness in later life, just as it was early on in one's career. These undertakings can range from taking up a new pastoral ministry when one's previous work is done to caring for fellow Jesuits in a retirement center to praying for the Society and the Church. When a Jesuit has no conviction "that what he is doing is a positive contribution to the work of Christ and his Church," Joseph Conwell has observed, "then he is inclined to be frustrated, depressed, and is likely to quit." Whatever it is that a man is doing better at the end of life—and sometimes it is simply his ability to cope with suffering—to that he should be missioned.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the fact that some students of gerontology, reflecting the biases of secular culture, discount religion's role in molding a happy old age, this is not the Jesuit experience. According to the men interviewed for this project, if there is a single activity essential for a peaceable old age, it is maintaining one's spiritual life. As one septuagenarian puts it, "If you want to live this life, you better pray. Prayer and the time that is spent in personal spiritual growth"—whether it's praying or ministering to others—"are the things that sustain and make life manageable." While the common spiritual goal of these religious is greater familiarity with God, their individual trajectories are strikingly varied. For some, prayer is easy; for others it is as distracted in old age as it was when

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<sup>66</sup>Conwell, "Living and Dying," 48.



they were young. And yet all report they are more familiar with God than ever before. Another shared feature is their inclination to discover God in all places and situations. And to a man they are grateful for their vocation.

In sum, the testimony of these elders reminds us that God gives these extra years for a reason. "In the light of faith, old age emerges as a rich time of life, a time of growth in interiority and inner resourcefulness," an elderly Jesuit writes, "a time to harvest the gifts of our past life and to foster a new and deeper relationship with God."<sup>67</sup> In a word, old age is not a burden, or not solely a burden—it is an awesome gift.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire for Interviews With Elderly Jesuits

#### Past

What has been your main ministry in the Society? Why did you end up doing this work?

What's the most responsible job you ever had?

In retrospect, how do you view your formation in the Society?

How has the Society changed in your lifetime? What do you think represents the biggest shifts?

The period after Vatican II and GC 31 was a time of great change and even turmoil in the Church and the Society. How would you describe the era of the 1960s and 1970s? What memories of that period stand out for you?

What, if any, changes introduced by the council and by the Society's general congregations were most unwelcome to you? Were there reforms that you experienced as positive?

Did the American civil-rights movement affect you in any way?

How did you experience the recent sexual-abuse scandal?

What do you think have been your greatest accomplishments?

Are you satisfied with the life choices you have made? Looking back, is there anything you would change or do differently if you lived your life over again?

Is there any period in your life that you would like to repeat?

Do you believe the Society has given you a fair chance to achieve your potential?

Has the Society disappointed you in any way?

What has been the most important learning experience in your life? What did it teach you?

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<sup>67</sup>Fagin, "Spiritual Exercises and Later Years," 69.

What has been the most awe-inspiring experience you've ever had?  
What has been the happiest time in your life? What was the least enjoyable period?  
Who's been your closest friend over the past forty years or so? Is there anyone to whom you turn in time of trouble or need now?  
What relationships or friendships in your life have been the most important?  
Has there been a person who has changed your life?  
Is there a person whom you've admired most in life?  
What experience in your life has given you the greatest joy?  
What do you think will be your life's greatest legacy?

### **Present**

What matters most to you now?  
Do you think of yourself as an older person? Was there a moment or experience when you began to think of yourself as elderly?  
Do you think about aging much?  
What in your view are the characteristics of someone who is aging well?  
What do you like least about aging or retirement?  
What is the hardest part about being retired or aging?  
What's the best part? Are there things you are better at now than when you were younger?  
What do you miss about your former work?  
How do you feel about your life now that you are retired?  
What would you say has been your dominant mood over the past six months?  
What makes you want to get out of bed in the morning?  
What activities have become important since retirement?  
What do you do with your time now?  
What is your most satisfying activity? What's the most fun?  
How do you deal with physical ailments or poor health?  
What's your biggest worry?  
What have you learned from the younger generation?  
As this stage of your life, what is most important to you in your spiritual life?  
How has your way of praying and your relationship with God shifted over the years?

### **Future**

When you think about the future, what makes you feel most uneasy? What gives you hope?  
What is your view on death?  
What do you want to experience before you go to God?

What three things would you like said about your life when you die?

Since you entered, the Society has changed immensely. Even the works in which you've been engaged have altered in your lifetime. How did you cope with these transformations?

What is the future of the Society?

What do you think accounts for your perseverance in the Society?

What have you done that has made perseverance possible?

Could you share any rules of life, or pearls of wisdom that you've gathered that might be useful to the next generation?

Is there anything we've left out of your story? Are there any other topics we should have discussed?



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Fax: 617-552-0925  
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