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(Psalm 71.18)***



All-age parking area

## **Old-age as Opportunity**

Lenten Pastoral Letter 2016

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## To the parishes of the Old Catholic Church

### Old-age as Opportunity

***“Even when I am old and grey, do not forsake me, O God,  
that I might proclaim your mighty deeds to generations to come.” (Psalm 71.18)***

Dear sisters and brothers,

The main focus of this Lenten pastoral letter 2016 is to give a Christian perspective to living life to the full in old-age.

Most things in life can be viewed from different angles – and this is certainly true for old-age, as the following snippets show.

- The annual number of deaths in Switzerland will double over the next 10 years and then slowly decrease again. This is not because of impending epidemics, but – statistically speaking – "because the surfeit created by a disproportionately ageing population will reduce by natural means".
- Average life expectancy continues to rise.
- The marketing departments of many businesses have discovered a new target group: active, well-off seniors. This became apparent to me while dozing on a beach in Sardinia, when I would be awoken yet again by the shrill whistle of a tour guide shepherding a flock of older hikers along the local trails.
- Much of the voluntary work within and outside of the church is done by those no longer gainfully employed.
- The future and financing of national social insurances, pension funds and health insurances present society with huge challenges.
- Membership of associations promoting assisted suicide is on the increase.
- The majority of the population is in favour of a law to make assisted suicide more readily available to the very old.
- Depending on circumstances, old-age is seen as either a blessing or a curse.
- Films, such as the Swiss movie "Late Bloomers", stimulate thought on the quality of life in old-age.

In fact every age has its own positive aspects and intrinsic value. It is part of human dignity and of the "likeness", in which God created humankind.

### Reflections

Life is divided - traditionally speaking – into four main stages: childhood and adolescence (up to 20 years), adult (20 to 40 years), middle age (40 to 60 years) and old-age (over 60 years). This is often compared to the seasons of the year: spring, summer, autumn and winter. Although of course, life-stages, unlike the seasons, are not repeated; each one is unique and, like all things earthly, will come to an end. Today that image of the four seasons is no longer valid. Now, it seems as if each decade is almost a separate stage, or as if the four main stages, mentioned above, are subdivided. It is also very difficult to develop a theory and practice for church strategies with regard to the elderly. This is because, in fact, there is no such thing as a typical old person, any more than there is a typical young person. People have different characters and characteristics, such as mental attitude, mobility and approach to life. Even so, it can be helpful to reflect on what is typical for the various life stages.

There is so much that could be said on the subject of old-age from a Christian point of view. In this pastoral letter I will limit myself to topics which I regard as timely and important when considering the church as a community. Any reflection on old-age is always a reflection on the mystery of human life itself. In many cultures and religions, the elderly are the guardians of the mysteries of life.

Life in old-age can never be equated simply with decay, loss, weakness and suffering; rather it is a phase of life on a par with any other. The elderly are fellow human beings (call them what you will: 'youthful elderly', pensioners, retirees, grey pride, old, 60 +, 70 +, seniors, etc.) and what they need both from the church and from society are appropriate policies, products and services; adapted to respond to the upheavals typical of today's rapidly changing world. Also the church should be aware that older people are not automatically more interested in the church than the young; but they are perhaps more sensitive to the, for them, more immediate issues of meaning in life. The church's ministry to senior citizens is a task that must be more clearly defined and more transparent in its aims. As with all church tasks, these aims are, I believe, best approached through the three main responsibilities of the church, namely worship, social care and proclamation (preaching, teaching, adult education). Working with seniors calls primarily on the areas: **worship, social care, leisure activities for themselves and others, and pastoral care**. These are areas that contribute to a better quality of life. Indeed all church action stems from the Christian faith and is intended "to help people live life to the full". The current exhibition in Berne "A Dialogue with time" shows that "retirement" is not static. The exhibition is showing until mid-2016 in the Museum of Communication. The point it makes is: there is no typical old-age. Aging is a varied and personal process that is different for everyone. And although public perception seems focussed on the negative effects of aging, old-age can also bring greater freedom and more time.

### **Worship**

Close attention to our liturgies and the creed shows that they offer a manifold and profound expression of our faith, and most particularly our faith in God's presence in creation and in our personal lives, God's mercy, and the resurrection of the dead. According to the Swiss psychologist C. G. Jung, regular celebration of the Eucharist is "healing". This is because the only way for the soul to remain healthy is by accepting the possibility of death and seeing death as a goal which can be approached with confidence.

### **Social Care**

This covers a whole range of practical services offering care and assistance. The church and its volunteer helpers should focus mainly on those services, which are not available within the structures of the national or social care networks. For example, there is no need for the church to provide meals-on-wheels or Spitex services (home nursing and care). But help can be offered in other meaningful ways, such as, regular visits to a lonely shut-in or reading the newspaper to someone who is visually impaired. Equally important examples include: car drivers giving a disabled person a ride to and from a church event, that they themselves would attend anyway; or offering a variety of support to convalescent patients throughout the period of their rehabilitation and beyond, and providing respite to caregivers generally, etc.

## **Leisure activities for oneself and others**

Here it is necessary to distinguish between two types of activities: recreation in the sense of having fun and adult education; and helping one another in the parish in the sense of voluntary work.

Like any other church, we need to ask ourselves whether we are doing enough in this area. Though as is true of everything in the church, it is not really about “doing”, but about creating space in which God and the Holy Spirit can act for the well-being of people. This could, of course, be through subjects of interest that connect earth and heaven, such as life issues, music, art, politics, literature, law, sexuality, health and fitness, etc. Experience shows that the situation is different in every parish, so a pastoral letter can be taken either as encouragement or as approval. In both cases, it has served its purpose if it has prompted some reflection on the topic; even if the conclusions reached are not the same. In discussions of this year's topic, I have heard the opinion expressed that our church already does enough for the young and the old and should do more for the 40 to 60 year age group, the middle aged. It seems important to point out that there is some ambivalence here: on the one hand the church is there for the people and is to be adaptable in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed. But, on the other hand, the church is not a service company. We are all church. Consequently the first question for individual church members is not what the church can do for them, but what they can do, on the basis of their personal faith as Christians, for the church and so for others.

Those who are mentally and physically sound do not want to be constantly overseen or supervised; they want to shape their own life independently. It is the right of each individual to decide where their priorities lie, e.g. sport, caring for grandchildren, travel, homework mentoring, etc. The church can only invite and encourage people in their individual context to take on voluntary duties and responsibilities, as is also true in the area of social care. With today's small families, leisure activities provide additional means of building new contacts and relationships. And it is precisely in old-age that it is important to find a sense of belonging and fulfilment in a variety of places. But a word of caution; where someone has been employed by, or held a leading position in the church prior to retirement, for various reasons it is not advisable for them to volunteer to work in their former area or position. Otherwise it can create the impression of a failure to let go, or of interference.

## **Pastoral Care**

With its biblical roots and its traditions, the Church has gained and maintained a certain "life wisdom" that can help Christians to understand and shape their life in relation to God. However, this wisdom or knowledge has to be integrated into each human life story. It is part of the priestly role to be able to accompany people in this process; both as individuals and as a community. There are many of our fellow human beings who suffer in old-age from anxiety and depression, something which had never affected them earlier in life. With old-age comes the realisation that strength and achievement no longer count; "being" is all important. Accompanying people on this journey demands a great deal of understanding and time.

### **Ministry to the sick and the dying**

The issues of severe illness, ministry to the dying and their loved ones, assisted suicide, and Christian burial practices were covered in the 2013 Lenten pastoral letter. However, as these issues are again very topical, I will offer the following succinct notes:

The "National Strategy for Palliative Care" which is implemented in Switzerland, is not primarily about "assisted suicide", but looks at treatment, care and ministry for the seriously ill and dying. It does not, however, preclude "passive euthanasia", such as, switching off life-support machines. Central to the strategy are the wishes and needs of the seriously and terminally ill patients and their relatives. Palliative care is based on three main disciplines: medicine, psychology and pastoral care. Only the last named falls largely within the scope and responsibility of churches and religions. Pastoral care is sometimes referred to by the term "Spiritual Care". This is a term which I find rather too intellectual and very misleading. In the German-speaking world, and possibly elsewhere, "spirituality" has become almost the opposite of religion. It is therefore important to understand the full breadth of the spiritual dimension of dying and not allow it to become shrouded by highbrow medical or atheistic interpretations, or misinterpretations. To express that in a more positive way: pastoral care must be free to make use of the entire scope and diversity of the responses, rites, etc., even in a hospital setting. This ministry should not be restricted to the psychological; it should also be physical, as for example in the anointing of the sick. Pastoral care of the elderly gives the minister the freedom to use more than words.

The churches and other religions in Switzerland support the above-mentioned "National Strategy for Palliative Care" and are opposed to active euthanasia or assisted suicide and are also against the introduction of "suicide due to old-age". What do we understand by these different terms? At the moment assisted suicide is available only to the terminally ill or to those suffering intolerable pain. Easier access to "suicide due to old-age" would make the lethal drug available to any elderly person; even those who were not ill, but simply old and tired of life, or wishing to avoid possible future suffering. The argument in favour of this rests on the basic human right to decide for oneself. The argument against speaks of the commandments of God and the risk that the elderly or those needing care would come under pressure from family or society. We need to rediscover the value of old-age, one that sees "Old-age as an Opportunity".

## Conclusion

Where is God still to be found in a world that has become so fragile and broken? Belief in God is no longer self-evident. There are different perceptions, opinions and life identities, which may well change as life takes its course. Questions about life's meaning are like questions about God, part of the exciting adventure of life. I can only try here to answer from a Christian point of view; hoping, of course, that others will share this view and/or be inspired by it.

From a biblical and theological perspective, aging can neither be regarded as the downward spiral of life, nor death as its end. In the early church death was understood, with a clarity which we lack today, as the rebirth of the human being into life in communion with God in his glory, or in paradise. And part of this faith is to accept that we shall not understand the meaning of all that happens to us in our lives, until we are with God. Only then will the mystery of our life be revealed to us. This view is very clearly expressed in the book of Ecclesiastes, where it says in the third chapter, verses 1, 2, and 11: ***"For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted... God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."***

Underlying this is the conviction that life cannot be taken for granted but is on loan. Life is a gift from God; not for us to treat as we wish, but as something we accept and to which we give our best effort.

Seen in this way, everyone has his/her OWN TIME – the time between birth and death, the journey of our wanderings through this world. God is there, regardless of whether we feel his presence or not. And the search for meaning does not end as we grow older, because each stage of life is limited and flourishes in its own time. Hermann Hesse compares life stages with **steps** in his poem of that name. Best known are the lines: ***A magic dwells in each beginning, protecting us, telling us how to live.***

The Bible describes experiences of these life stages in Luke 2.21-40: Mary and Joseph bring their son Jesus to the Temple to thank God for his birth. There they meet an old man named Simeon, who had waited long years for this moment. He recognizes this child as the promised Messiah. He thanks God that he has been able to experience this moment, but at the same time he knows that his service in the Temple has now come to an end. A new life stage is dawning for him. Then the prophet Anna has a similar experience, she also has an interesting and long life history. This story shows that even in old-age, people are constantly invited to deepen their relationship:

- with fellow human beings and their environment,
- with themselves in the past, the present and the future
- and with God and with the meaning of their personal life.

The church celebrates this feast of the Presentation of Christ with the blessing of candles. Also known as "Candlemas", it is the time when baptismal candles are blessed. These candles accompany us on our Christians journey throughout life. They are with us not only at our baptism, confirmation, first communion, wedding and funeral services, but also in all of life's situations, whether times of celebration, contemplation or challenge. Your baptismal candle is an important symbol of the Light of Christ, with you to the end of your days. If it has been lost along the way, do please ask your priest for a new one.

Bishop Harald Rein

*(Translation from German by The Revd Adèle Kelham)*



Bishop Harald Rein preaching at the confirmation service 2015 in Bern, with a pair of 3-D glasses. (Photo: Werner Brechbühl)