



*Our souls don't age,  
like a wine, they mature*

Fr Ron Rolheiser OMI

#### YEAR OF THE FAMILY - CELEBRATING SENIORS

This year is the fifth anniversary of the apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia, The Joy of Love*. It is also the Year of St Joseph and of the Family. Pope Francis has dedicated this Sunday as the first World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly.

*The Joy of Love* was the outcome of Synods on the Family in 2014 and 2015 which included global consultation and the presence of many lay people at both meetings of the Synod of Bishops.

#### MESSAGE FROM POPE FRANCIS

Pope Francis dedicated a number of audiences to the pastoral care of the family during 2014 and 2015. During an audience focussed on grandparents in 2015, he said:

*When I was in the Philippines, the Filipino people greeted me saying "Lolo Kiko" - meaning Grandpa Francis - "Lolo Kiko", they said! The first important thing to stress; it is true that society tends to discard us, but the Lord definitely does not! The Lord never discards us. He calls us to follow Him in every age of life, and old age has a grace and a mission too, a true vocation from the Lord. Old age is a vocation.*

In his message for this First World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly, Pope Francis writes:

*It makes no difference how old you are, whether you still work or not, whether you are alone or have a family, whether you became a grandmother or grandfather at a young age or later, whether you are still independent or need assistance. Because there is no retirement age from proclaiming the Gospel ...*

#### A NEW VISION OF AGEING

The Australian Catholic Bishops' 2016 Social Justice Statement explored what it means to age in today's society.

In the introduction, Bishop Vincent Long wrote:

*We are seeing a new vision of ageing, one where many people enter their 60s and 70s in good health and with plenty of skills and energy to offer our communities... Old age and frailty will come to us all eventually, and we will need the help and support of others. This is a time when we must see a just society in action ... Stereotypes of older people as doddering, out of touch or dependent are false and dehumanising. People are not commodities, to be valued only for their productivity or purchasing power. They are human beings in the fullest sense, precious in their own right, possessing a dignity that was given them by God.*

#### THE GIFT OF YEARS

Joan Chittister is an American Benedictine sister. She has been a prolific writer for over 50 years. Occasionally controversial, but overwhelmingly a wise and prophetic writer in the Benedictine tradition.

At the age of 70 Joan Chittister wrote *The Gift of Years Growing Older Gracefully*. Joan is now 85 and is still writing and presenting at conferences. From the introduction of *The Gift of Years*, she writes:

*This is a special period of life - maybe the most special of them all. But with it come all the fears and hopes of a lifetime. To live these years well, we need to look at every one of the fears and hopes head up and alive. Life is not about age, about the length of years we manage to eke out of it. It is about ageing, about living into the values offered in every stage of life. As E.M. Forster wrote, "We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us."*

*It is time for us to let go of both our fantasies of eternal youth and our fears of getting older, and to find the beauty of what it means to age well. It is time to understand that the last phase of life is not non-life; it is a new stage of life. These older years - reasonably active, mentally alert, experienced and curious, socially important and spiritually significant - are meant to be good years*

*This book looks at the many dimensions of the ageing process, its purpose and its challenges, its struggles and its surprises, its problems and its potential, its pain and its joys. It deals with the sense of rejection that comes from feeling out of touch with the rest of life. It examines the difference between doing and being, and argues that both are important dimensions of life.*

#### BLESSINGS OF THESE YEARS

At the conclusion of forty reflections on different topics, Joan Chittister names a related burden of these years with a blessing of these years. These are some of the blessings:

... that we are the ones whose responsibility it is to prove the stereotypes wrong, to give age its own fullness of life.

... to take on the role of thinker, of philosopher, of disputant, of interrogator, of spiritual guide in a world racing to nowhere, with no true human goal and no lived wisdom in sight.

... the invitation to go lightfooted into the here and now - because we spend far too much of life preparing for the future rather than enjoying the present.

#### A CALL TO THE ELDERS

From the Australian Catholic Bishops' 2016 Social Justice Statement:

To senior Australians, we ask: What will you bring to the table? How will you embrace the change in your later lives? What do we want to give to our families and communities? Ageing brings gifts: a centeredness that allows one to rise above the frenetic pace of modern life; a sense of history that reaches far beyond the transience of popular culture or the media's news cycle; the wisdom gained from past mistakes or failures; and a sense of community, which a culture of individualism cannot provide. Time is limited; how will you use it? Your gifts are great; how will you pass them on?

So we call on you:

- ◆ How will you use your time as a member of the community of faith? Your spiritual fulfilment is an important part of the legacy and faith you will pass on.
- ◆ You have the opportunity to pass on a bequest of healing for past quarrels, an end to disputes, and to relate in love across boundaries of family and society. How will you use that opportunity?
- ◆ You have the wisdom of years that can offer a great deal for the common good. It is important to remain engaged in national debates about the future of our society.

#### A BLESSING

May the light of your soul mind you.

May all your worry and anxiousness about your age be transfigured.

May you be given wisdom for the eyes of your soul to see this as a time of gracious harvesting. May you have the passion to heal what has hurt you, and allow it to come closer and become one with you.

May you have great dignity, and a sense of how free you are, above all, may you be given the wonderful gift of meeting the eternal light that is within you.

May you be blessed; and may you find a wonderful love in yourself for your self.

John O'Donohue *Benedictus*