

## Our spiritual journey intensifies as we age

*In this ongoing series on Dignity of the Elderly, we pause to reflect on what we can do to journey with our older brothers and sisters at a special time of life.*

When we speak of lifelong development in the elderly, we often think of things older people can do to keep busy - new things they can learn, new hobbies, work that is suited to their strength and experience.

Those who are mobile and independent are labeled “successful”; those who are ill and/or dependent on caregivers are often regarded as “burdens” on their family.

What we often fail to see is that for many of our elderly, this is the time of their lives when they are finally able to rest in God. As energy levels decrease and bodies degenerate, they find that their stories, their relationships and their experiences are distilled in long quiet days in God.

This gives them a sense of the ultimate purpose and meaning of their lives. Those who believe in God and have a community of faith supporting them will find that these days are more and more about “resting in God” and “growing in Christ” (*Spiritual Growth and Care in the Fourth Age of Life* by Elizabeth MacKinlay, 2006). For those with no particular beliefs, meaning and purpose will come mainly from their most significant relationships.



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As members of the community of believers, a major part of our ministry to the elderly is to help them in this last stage of their spiritual journey. This is an area Small Christian Communities can

focus on.

We need to think in terms of journeying spiritually with the elderly in our homes and our neighbourhoods.

How often have we heard ourselves or a caregiver saying to someone who is frail, elderly and feeling ill: put your trust in God, all will be well. Or, don’t worry, just eat and you will feel better. Or, I will pray for you, don’t worry.

We mean well but we merely scratch the surface with these words. We dare not ask the questions that will give the elderly the opportunity to describe their fears, worries or concerns. We would prefer to clean the room or cook some porridge, rather than sit with the elderly person, listening

***“I notice in my body the beginning of some trouble that must be natural for an old man. I bear it with resignation, even if it is sometimes tiresome and also makes me afraid it will get worse.***

***It is not pleasant to think too much about this; but once more, I feel prepared for anything.***

***It gives me joy to keep faithful to my religious practices: Holy Mass, the Divine Office, the whole rosary, with meditation on the mysteries, constant preoccupation with God and with spiritual things.”***

From retreat notes of Pope John XXIII in the Vatican from Nov 26 –Dec 2, 1961.

to whatever he or she wants to say, or even just being present in silent companionship.

Helping others on their spiritual journey means being available to them and letting them voice their concerns. With the elderly, these could include what would happen to their unmarried child after they die, their fear of death, or their fear of running out of money and becoming a burden on their families.

It also means helping them rest in God by encouraging conversation and reflection about spiritual matters. For example, you could ask, “What is God like for you?”

or “What do you feel about being old?”, “What was the greatest challenge you ever faced?” and “What was a very sad time for you?”

But asking is not enough. You must be prepared to stay and listen to the answers. Perhaps the hurt of broken relationships or the pain of losing a loved one will flow. It is in conversations patiently and lovingly exchanged that spiritual depths can be touched and meaning emerge.

We need to understand the “work” that people are called to do in the later stages of life. The elderly are the custodians of a rich tradition and of faith in our loving God which they hand on to the next generation. They are at a stage when their most important work is to integrate their lives into a meaning they feel peaceful about.

We need to think of the whole of our lives as a spiritual journey that stops only when we die and not when we grow old.

Professor Elizabeth MacKinlay, who was in Singapore for seminars on ageing last March, said that if we only value youth and consider ageing a problem and burden, then our youth have nothing to look forward to or to live for.

Life, and our spiritual journey, will end when youth fades. The young, the elderly and everyone else in between need to recognise that old age brings a new dimension to our spiritual journey and to truly rest in God, we should embrace this time for ourselves and for those who are already elderly.

## Faith & Light – A community for the intellectually disabled

A THOUSAND questions, doubts and regrets often arise when parents discover their child is intellectually disabled. Why did this happen? Why us? What did we do wrong?

Mr Alaric Wang, 50, grappled with these questions when his son Joseph was born nine years ago. The intellectually disabled are often misunderstood, discriminated against and laughed at. The pain that they and their families suffer as a result is one that does not go away.

Faith and Light International was born out of these families’ need for support. It is a spiritual and ecumenical movement that began in 1971 in a Roman Catholic context. Faith and Light Community, Singapore, is 10 years old, with three communities based at the parishes of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady Star of the Sea.

Mr Wang, the Vice Provincial Coordinator for Singapore, explained that the community celebrates the lives of its intellectually disabled members, the “Special Persons” at the heart of the community.

“We see the Special Person as equal in dignity - not ability, but dignity. We treasure the Special Person as we treasure each person, who carries within them the gifts God has given them,” he said.

The community draws its inspiration from Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John (9:1-3). The passage describes an episode in Jerusalem when Jesus walked past a blind man and his disciples asked him: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus replied: “It was not that this man sinned or his parents, but that the works of God may be made manifest in him.”

The Faith and Light Community exists to witness to the ways in which God’s glory is being made manifest through intellectually disabled persons.

“When you look at the intellectually disabled, their ability to forgive, to be affectionate, warm, spontaneous and welcoming are so great that it cuts through all barriers,” Mr Wang said.

The intellectually disabled person’s heart is “so happy and so able”, he added, whereas “we able persons carry with us so much baggage that our hearts become



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Each parish community of about 20 members meets once a month. They sing, pray together, read and reflect on Scripture together, and share what has been going on in their lives.

“It is an opportunity for parents of the intellectually disabled to be together with other parents, to share their feelings, pain and be nurtured by the community. They

find support and comfort in one another and better understand their own and each other’s struggle,” Mr Wang said.

The three-hour meetings often end with feasting, when birthdays, anniversaries and other special occasions are celebrated.

The community also goes on outings together to places like the zoo, for walks and picnics. These help Special Persons and their families integrate with the wider society.

Looking ahead, Faith and Light Community, Singapore hopes in its second decade to make itself better known, so that the “closet intellectually disabled” and their families can step out with the community’s help.

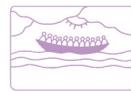
Mr Wang sees Faith and Light as

part of the Church’s whole way of being pro-life, of cherishing life at every stage and in every person.

While the Church’s pro-life groups provide support to parents while the disabled child is still in the womb, Faith and Light continues that support after the child is born for families of the intellectually disabled.

The community will go on pilgrimage in February 2012 and invites all intellectually disabled persons and their families to join them on their three-day trip to Majodi Centre in Johor Bahru. Those who are interested can contact: Magdelene Yip (mag842@hotmail.com) or Alaric Wang (wangkokwing@yahoo.com).

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