

**THE PLACE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
IN THE “SENIOR AGE” OF ADULT DEVELOPMENT**

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Abstract

This article argues that the “Adulthood” stage of life is expanding and presenting the Christian Churches with new challenges and opportunities to be relevant in the world today. The age bracket of 65 to 80 years is a new group within the traditional life cycle of human development that is increasingly open to personal fulfillment and spiritual transformation. Part one looks at the current situation of senior adults. Part two is a deeper examination of this emerging life cycle within adulthood. The senior stage is a time open to deeper religious faith and holiness. Part three examines the Christian faith tradition. Senior adults have their own religious and spiritual needs which require creative and new attention. Part four proposes a movement towards integration and transformation. Benefits and difficulties of this new stage are examined.

Part I The Situation of Senior Adulthood

Today as the baby boom generation begins to retire and their life expectancy continues to increase, a new adult life stage is emerging. After successfully navigating young adulthood and midlife responsibilities, a senior age of adulthood is developing and delaying old age. As a group this segment of the population has achieved and accomplished much in their 65+ years of life. They tend to be well educated, experienced, successful and active. Despite possible minor health crisis earlier in their lives, their health, due to advances in medicine, is good. They are full of life and are years from the ultimate finality of death. With their families reared, this age group is looking for new and significant

experiences that will let them develop into the full and integrated persons they were meant to be. Today, as this senior group of adults begins to emerge within the Church, a more concerted effort needs to be made to adapt to the changing shape of adulthood.

What is striking about this portion of the adult population as compared with their parents is that their life expectancy has increased beyond what might have been imagined only a short time ago. Population statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau (3 January 2006, 1) are very telling; the baby boom generation, which demographically includes those who were born between 1946 and 1964, are soon to turn 65 and will begin to enter the senior stage of life in 2011. As a group they are concerned with their wellbeing and are likely to remain very active during their retirement years. It is predicted, by the year 2030, there will be 57.8 million baby boomers living; 54.9 percent will be female. Their number and needs present an interesting challenge to both civic and religious institutions because they are a generation that will live well into their 80's.

The current situation that is facing the Church in the United States during this first part of the new millennium was foreseen already a decade ago, as is attested to by the following excerpt from Jill Smolowe's 1996 *Time* magazine article, "Older Longer."

Old age is, in fact, fast becoming the quintessential American experience. Medical breakthroughs and saner life styles have increased life expectancy by a year or two in each recent decade.

Today average life expectancy in the U.S. is 75.5 years, up from 47 at the turn of the [last] century. In the past half – decade alone, the 65-and-older crowd has increased 7% -- almost twice the growth rate of those under 65—to reach 34 million, or 13% of the U.S. population. Demographers project that after the first baby boomers hit retirement in 2011, the numbers will explode, with people 65 and older numbering 1 in 5 by the middle of [this] century (Smolowe 1996, 76).

Adulthood as one of the main stages in the human life cycle is expanding and is presenting the Church with new challenges and opportunities to be relevant in the world today.

With an increase in their leisure time, a number of these senior adults are seeking to develop never before thought of interests and hobbies that have remained dormant since childhood or adolescence. A fair portion of them are entering this life stage having to navigate the death of their spouse or a significant other to other “losses.” Many are looking to start a second or third career. Their outlook is even more altruistic than it was earlier in their lives. They have a growing concern for others and the world situation. This senior stage of adulthood is ripe with a general re-evaluation and re-ordering of life goals and values toward a new direction. For those who already belong to a faith tradition this task of transformation is happening in the context of their religious beliefs and practice. For those who do not belong to a church or see themselves as members of a particular congregation, there is a yearning for deeper and more meaningful spiritual experiences. Richard Ostling draws upon this reality in the *Time* article,

“The Church Search.” He states, “Of the generation born after World War II, 95% received a religious upbringing, and had they behaved like their parents before them, the churches and synagogues of their childhood would be thriving” (1993, 44). He goes on to claim that, “Today, a quiet revolution is taking place that is changing not only the religious habits of millions of American but the way churches go about recruiting members to keep their doors open. Increasing numbers of baby boomers who left the fold years ago are turning religious again, but many are traveling from church to church or faith to faith, sampling creeds, shopping for a custom-made God” (1993, 44).

The Church today must begin to recognize this emerging group and support them and respond to their growing needs. In much of the literature being promulgated by the Church towards the religious education of adults this specific sub-group of senior adulthood is not being considered except in a very superficial way. John Paul II, in the document *On Catechesis in Our Time*, clearly states the ideal for the Roman Catholic Church, “The catechesis of Adults . . . is the principal form of catechesis, because it is addressed to persons who have the greatest responsibilities and the capacity to live the Christian message in its fully developed form” (1979, no. 43). While this may be where the Church wants much of its energy and resources, there seems to be very little in the way of programming and planning being directed to the current needs of this new emerging group of seniors.

This essay is an attempt to acknowledge this age bracket of 65 to 80 as an emerging group within the traditional life cycle of human development. By differentiating them from younger adults and those who are in old age, it becomes easier to see how the Church is currently failing its mission to form and develop the faith of all adults. The hope is that by exploring the dynamics of this subgroup's existence, greater effort can be devoted to their religious education and transformation into holy Christian disciples.

Part II Thinking About The Present Situation of Senior Adults

Traditionally, the developmental stages of life were divided into three main categories: childhood, adulthood and old age. Childhood was often seen as a protected stage of life. It was a time of nurturing and teaching a child to assume one day the role and responsibilities of an adult. The transition into adulthood most often occurred once the child began to work and help support the family. Adulthood was thus seen as a time of work and raising a family. Because of harsh economic and social conditions life expectancy was short and leisure time was a luxury. Adults would work most of their short lives only to die shortly before retirement or soon afterwards.

Friedrich Schweitzer in his book, *The Postmodern Life Cycle*, makes the case that the traditional view of adulthood no longer fits the contemporary situation. He argues that within the life cycle of adulthood many major

developmental stages exist. Drawing on the work of Peter Laslett, Schweitzer argues that there is a sub-stage between Adulthood and Old Age called the “Third Age.” I prefer to call it the “Senior Age” because it generally begins at the age of 65, where in the United States adults are classified as senior citizens and until recently became eligible for full Social Security benefits. Schweitzer states, “We have to let go of our traditional assumptions concerning the sequence of adulthood and old age in order to consider the possibility of another age or stage, which comes into the picture after modern adulthood but clearly before the last stage of life” (2004, 98).

The Enlightenment vision of the truly adult person is the image of an individual who is autonomous, independent, and rational, and, moreover, is dynamically growing in his or her capacities (Schweitzer 2004, 83). Modernity produced an expectation of late adulthood and old age as being a time of quiet. Retirement was understood as a reward for having worked hard for most of one’s life. Advances in health care and the twentieth century introduction of pension funds made retirement a real possibility for a majority of the population. It, however, created some tensions. “After having striven for, and having achieved, a position within working life, and after having defined oneself through this position, many people find it extremely difficult to accept and to appreciate a new and different status that is based exactly on not having this kind of position” (Schweitzer 2004, 99-100). In this modern view, the meaning of one’s life is

called into question when life is no longer productive and progressive in terms of professional achievement.

The movement into old age created another difficulty. There arose a tension between “integrity” and “despair” (Schweitzer 2004, 100; see Erikson’s model of the life cycle). In this traditional vision, old age, became a time to make peace with one’s past, in the recognition that it cannot be changed and all will soon be finished.

In contrast to this grim prospect, Peter Laslett sees the emergence of the Third or Senior Age of adulthood as a time of hope and fulfillment. Instead of the traditional sequence of development, he outlines the life cycle in the following way:

First comes an era of dependence, socialization, immaturity and education;
second an era of independence, maturity and responsibility of earning and of saving; third an era of personal fulfillment; fourth an era of final dependence, decrepitude and death (1991, 4; Schweitzer 2004, 104).

Laslett points out new opportunities and possibilities coming after the many obligations of paid work have ended. Schweitzer echoes this sentiment and catalogues two of the important changes that have made the traditional sequence obsolete. First, he recognizes that these more mature or senior adults are maintaining a higher level of activity. “Rather than follow the pattern of being content with looking back at one’s life, they develop new ideas and start new

projects” (2004, 104). They are traveling, attending university, taking enrichment courses, and the like. Second, parents, especially women, are experiencing that the time between the last child’s leaving home and the time when the parent reaches age sixty-five or seventy has become longer and longer. (2004, 104). These and other similar situations have called into question the stereotype that work life is followed by inactive retirement and a time of being taken care of as a prelude to death.

From a religious perspective, it is important to acknowledge this new age of adulthood so that the Church can support and advocate for these senior members of society as they strive for the fulfillment that seems within their grasp. In the past the programs and services used for adult ministry were based on the older traditional understanding of adulthood. Today, it is imperative that the Church adapt to the changing shape of adulthood. Religious education needs to address the situations and concerns of this emerging group of senior adults.

Part III The Roman Catholic Faith Tradition

The era prior to Vatican II saw the Church’s ministry towards adults as primarily liturgical or sacramental. Focus was placed on the sacraments and the fulfillment of the initiation process. Baptism, generally given to children, was seen as the doorway into the Church and understood as the beginning of a life of faith. Eucharist and Confirmation were received at subsequent stages of

development. First Eucharist was given when the individual first came to the age of reason. Confirmation, at least in the Roman Catholic Church, was often seen as the last step of initiation and entrance into adult faith. Often, however, Confirmation was regularly seen as a “graduation” from religious education. Consequently, the understanding that there is a responsibility to continue one’s faith development throughout one’s life was lost. Adults did not seek further formation in their faith and were not offered many religious education opportunities by the Church. Instead, the Church concentrated its efforts on liturgical celebrations, devotions, and pastoral care to the sick and dying. The pastoral ministry to the dying, which itself often included the sacrament of anointing, was primarily directed to older adults who were either remotely or imminently preparing for death.

Today, the tendency to focus on young adults and the old aged who are preparing for death can still be experienced in the Church. With the reform of the liturgy there was an effort to rediscover the richness of all of the sacraments. The reformers reaffirmed the understanding that once an individual is fully initiated there is both an entrance into a community of faith and an ongoing responsibility to participate and build up the Church, the Body of Christ. The reality of the current situation, however, is that many catechized adults are not practicing their faith. This has developed into a major concern for those involved with planning and administering religious education programs. The Roman Catholic Church

highlights particular forms of adult catechesis in the *General Directory for Catechesis* as ways of trying to draw adults back into the faith. A significant focus of attention is currently being directed to catechesis for use in particularly momentous events in life, such as Marriage, the Baptism of children, and in sickness (Congregation for the Clergy 1997, no.176). These efforts are still primarily directed to those who are young adults or are already in old age. The reality of what is hoped for falls short of the ideal. Most of the sacramental signs that are used apply to children, young adults and the very old. Senior adults are basically left with attending daily Mass or Sunday services in order to nurture their faith. While this is very beneficial, it only begins to address the particular religious and spiritual needs of this segment of the Christian population. Because of their life experiences, education, and situation in life, senior adults seem to be ripe for deeper religious and spiritual experiences. The field of Theology and practitioners of Religious Education need to recognize this emerging reality and develop new practices and ways of celebrating the rites that honor the tradition of the Church while helping senior adults grow in faithful discipleship. Formation is meant for all adults, who are at every different stage in the development of their faith. Unfortunately, those who are seniors today are offered little support and are given few opportunities by the Church to have their particular needs or life situation addressed.

The Catholic Bishops of the United States, in the *National Directory for Catechesis*, define adult religious education in the Church as catechesis. It states that “catechesis aims to bring about in the believer an ever more mature faith in Jesus Christ, a deeper knowledge and love of his person and message, and a firm commitment to follow him” (USCCB 2005, no. 19a). In the end catechesis is meant to bring about conversion and a maturation of faith so that the believer willingly becomes one of Christ’s disciples. There is, however, a tension in this understanding because adult catechesis, which promotes mature adult faith, does more than complete one’s initiation into a Catholic way of life. “It helps adults to develop a deeper sense of their cooperation with the Holy Spirit for the mission of the Church in the world and for her internal life as well” (USCCB 2005, no. 48a). What is also implied but not very well stated is the understanding that adult formation is directed towards holiness which necessarily is an integration and transformation of the self and the world to union with God. “The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity” (USCCB 2005, no. 19b; John Paul II 1979, no. 5). The field of Religious Education is challenged by this insight because it points to the need to teach beyond the basics. Those who are entering the Senior stage of life were given the basics of faith during their childhood. A large percentage of them were catechized and fully initiated into a faith tradition.

Unfortunately, few of them continued to develop or deepen their religious side during the earlier stages of adulthood. Now, in their senior years, many are rediscovering faith and the importance of belonging to a religious community. The religious education curriculum, in all its academic and pastoral forms, needs to recognize this emerging reality and speak to the senior life stage as much as it does to other stages in the life cycle.

What much of this discussion is speaking about, in veiled language, is the universal call to holiness and the Church's obligations to foster its growth and development in the world through the efforts of evangelization and witness. The fifth chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, speaks of the universal call to holiness and explains it as the common vocation for all Christians to share in the discipleship of Christ. All the faithful are invited and obliged to holiness and the ultimate perfection of their own state of life. The document states, "The followers of Christ, called by God not in virtue of their works but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons of God in the baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that sanctification which they have received from God" (*LG* 1964, no. 40). The emphasis in this divine vocation is upon the relationships each member of the Church has with each other and with God. The Church, who is the community of

faithful members, is holy because God's people are holy. God has sanctified the Church with his love and forgiveness.

There are two effects of this call. The first is a communitarian responsibility to work toward the building up of the Church's overall holiness by doing works of compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience. The second effect is a personal movement, cultivated by God, towards sanctity which is achieved according to one's own gifts and duties. The disciple as he or she advances along the way of living faith engenders hope and good works through the dynamism of love (*LG* 1964, no. 41).

Part IV A Movement Toward Integration and Transformation

The difficulty for religious education today stems from the need to go beyond what is offered by the sacramental and catechetical aspects of the Church's tradition. Senior adults are seeking more than the basics of the Christian faith. They are looking to the Church to offer them meaning for their lives, holistic experiences, and encounters with the divine that can help to make sense of their lives. Whether they are already formed in the faith or are lapsed Christians returning and seeking entrance into the fold, indoctrination and initiation are not the complete answer. I would argue that the Church today has an obligation to present other kinds of faith-filled experiences to these individuals so that they might be transformed and sanctified by God into holiness. These could include

scripture study groups; religious enrichment through travel, pilgrimages, and retreats; specialized groups that minister to the divorced, widowed and primary care givers; and experiences of prayer and devotions which find their roots in ancient and modern practices of faith. Some of these could include the communal praying of the divine office, yoga classes, novenas, and the celebration of special feasts.

In the end, seniors need to be supported by a visible community and helped to offer true witness in the world as they live out their discipleship to Christ. The pastoral plan, *Our Hearts were Burning Within Us*, supports this position with its set of goals, principles, contents and approaches for adult formation. It states as the first of three major goals that adult catechesis should invite and enable ongoing conversion to Jesus in holiness of life (USCCB 2002, no. 64). This can only happen by deepening personal prayer which is directed to holiness in daily life.

Cate Siejk in her article, "Learning to Love The Questions: Religious Education In an Age of Unbelief," recognizes that faith enters the Christian's life as God's gift. This grace, however, can not be received unless there is a radical openness and response to the divine call to live as a disciple of Jesus. There needs to be openness to his gift of salvation and love (Siejk 1999, 163). For Siejk the community is involved in this task of religious education into the fullness of God. She states, "The Christian community is responsible for engaging in the

dynamic process of faith by sharing its gospel tradition and by nurturing and promoting (not coercing) the individual Christian's developing faith response to God's gift of love" (Siejk 1999, 164). With Siejk, I believe that "religious education must understand Christian faith as a holistic affair, and maintain a balance between being faithful to the church's tradition and respecting believer's efforts to be authentic in living their Christian faith in a post modern world" (Siejk 1999, 167). The gift of holiness that is ultimately communicated to us by God's love needs to be at the center of this dynamic relationship. However, it must also be seen as a wider event that does not exist or happen in isolation from the rest of the church or the community.

The senior adult stage of development, as it is experienced today, can bring to religious education a number of benefits and difficulties. One of the positive aspects that can be seen as an aid to the adult learner's move toward integration, transformation and holiness is the presence of trigger events. Initially these experiences might be seen as negative situations because they shake the person from a complacency or ambivalence and place them into a state of crisis. However, these events can be the door to the sacred. Harold Horell in his article, "Fostering Hope: Christian Religious Education In A Postmodern Age," offers the observation that life passage events such as emerging from adolescence, giving birth to a child, experiencing God profoundly in nature, or working through a mid-life transition can be viewed as having the potential to trigger conversion

experiences that can lead one to God and a life of Christian discipleship (2004, 7). Seniors who are ending a very productive time of their lives often undergo similar life changing moments as they switch jobs, experience retirement, work through the death of their spouse, or even take pleasure in their new found freedom traveling or discovering new landscapes of their own being. All of these events and experiences could be trigger events to conversion and a deeper understanding of faith.

The Church, in recognizing the power of these experiences as catalysts to conversion and transformation, must focus more of its ministry on the spiritual, psychological and physical needs that are caused by these trigger events. The church can easily make its presence and support felt by offering counseling, spiritual direction, retreat opportunities and other similar services. These would respond to some of the real needs of this segment of the population as they face their crisis and possible conversion.

A second positive aspect is the senior adult learner's desire for wholeness, integration and meaning in their lives. For those who are already believers this often spurs them to re-evaluate their childhood or adolescent faith. Their stage of life provides them with the experience and maturity to engage some of the deeper questions of life's meaning and direction. This can often lead to new forms of prayer and spirituality. It can also assist them to recognize certain injustices in their own lives or in the world and move them to seek forgiveness, reconciliation

and transformation of the social order. For those who are not believers, this senior stage of development can be a wonderful time of discovery and entrance into a more prayerful and spiritually grounded existence.

The major difficulty with this movement toward transformation and integration is the tension caused by the different way religious education passes on knowledge. When it is catechesis in the strict sense there is a certain amount of control the Church exercises over its dogmas and praxis. The Church is in authority and the faithful are expected to accept her teaching. This, however, is not the highest form of faith. Transformative learning is also necessary for growth and continued faith development. It is in the tension between religious formation and critical reflection of one's beliefs that transformation and deeper faith emerges. It is in this crucible of learning where most often difficulties seem to occur. As the individual begins to learn and live in a transformative way, the boundaries and foundations of faith begin to get tested. In a process of critical reflection there is both a possibility for the individual to grow deeper in his or her faith tradition or there is a second possibility that they go in a different direction. From an outside vantage point, the end result of both possibilities is equally valid. Both have brought the individual to a holistic and deeper level of their existence. From the Church's perspective, however, there is a difficulty with the second possible development because it is seen as a loss of faith and not as integration.

Jane Regan speaks of this phenomenon in her book, *Toward an Adult Church*. She says that it is in the crisis moments, when the individual comes to be at odds with their traditional meaning-system, that the community needs to be at its best. Not only is the community required to be a welcoming and hospitable, but, “The community also has a role in supporting those who are separating from old meaning systems and embracing new ones” (Regan 2002, 60). Her thought can be applied to the developmental stage of senior adults who by their life situation are ripe for a process of inquiry, self-reflection and deepening spirituality. As old meaning systems are shed and new ones are created, the Church must continue to embrace them as they struggle to find new paradigms of meaning. This sentiment is shared by Robert Kegan, who in “There the Dance Is,” states, “The community must be able to serve as ‘holding environment’ for each developmental meaning-system; if it cannot, the repudiation of an old meaning-system will mean the repudiation of the community as well. For a religious community, the challenge is to provide a religious holding environment, a support for each meaning-system that resonates to, and makes publicly shareable, its own appropriation of ultimacy” (1980, 440). Not to stay and remain as an anchor or ‘holding community’ for them will in the long run place the church in a worse situation than it is today with this segment of the senior population.

A second dilemma with the integration and transformation of seniors is finding a viable way for the Church to be a catalyst of change and growth.

Recognizing the traditional approach to adult formation and catechesis is not enough. It is imperative that the Church truly works to expand its ministry to include this emerging population of senior adults. No longer can the Church only rely on the formal and traditional praxis of faith to stimulate conversion and discipleship. That is not to say the sacraments, devotions and liturgies do not have their place. They are and will remain part of the Church's traditions and rituals. Rather, the point that the Church needs to reflect on sooner than later is how it will successfully minister and educate its senior members into the holiness that is the ultimate stage of mature faith.

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