

# **Put your arm-chair into the sunset of your life**

## ***How to grow old gratefully and to wait joyfully until the Lord shall come to take you home.***

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### **Introduction:**

The life of a Christian defines itself from the end toward which it is directed: his final goal is communion and union with God in the new creation at the end. We are destined from birth on to find our final goal and full identity in communion with God through our communion with Jesus Christ (Jn 17:23-26). We are called to grow from the image in which we were created into likeness of Christ; in other words, into conformity with him, in whose image we were created. In the words of Saint Paul: *The mystery of your life is: Christ lives in you the glory to come* (Col 1:27). Life is seen as a progression in which and through which, we move by the Holy Spirit to become more like Christ in whose image we are created (Rom 8:29). The full completion of being shaped into his image comes at the end of life's journey. If this completion is not yet fully accomplished at the end, then (according to our Catholic faith) we will have to undergo further growth processes till we reach the goal toward which we were created.

Most of us know that this is our goal in life. During the years of our most active life however, this goal is easily pushed into the background and we might even lose track of it. Death is not something we often think about, indeed, we try to avoid the thought of our final passage from this life to the next. It is scary and unpredictable. Yet, everyday our bodies are ageing. Perhaps we don't fear death so much as the "dying process" with its potential for pain, in competency, dependence, or immobility. We want to live. We want to be in control and have it all together. We are not ready to go.

We religious and priests in particular have dedicated our life to *follow the Lord more freely and to imitate him more exactly as he present himself in the Gospels (Perfecte Caritatis 2)*. Therefore, we should be guided by this life commitment when thinking of our last encounter with the Lord, the day when he will call us home. The older we get, the more we should feel the need to step back and consciously start reconsidering once again the aim and goal of the life we wanted to pursue and examine ourselves as to how far we have lived our life in this direction.

At this stage in our life four main areas of concern repeatedly ask for prayerful reflection and thoughtful meditation. The aim of such meditation is to make us more ready to face the end of our life's journey peacefully and joyfully. Each meditation intends preparing us to meet the Lord on the day he will call us home.

### **1. The discovery of God's love and care in your life**

Here you are invited to *muse* that means, to think at length and in depth, in a day dreaming fashion, on your life in order to become more and more aware of the thousand occasions in which and through which, God has shown you that he really loved and cared for you every moment of your existence. This means, you should concentrate on the good things in your life and the moments when you felt that God was in a special way close to you with his love and care. Look for the red thread that runs through your life in all the ups and downs that indicate how God's love and care never left you even though you did not recognize him or, maybe even when you felt abandoned and left all alone. Listen to a God who says to you:

*Are you not my darling child, the child I delight in? As often as I may have to speak against you, I always remember you with love. I am deeply moved for you; I will always have compassion on you, says the Lord (Jer 31:20).*

*Have no fear, do not let your hands fall limp. Yahweh your God is there with you, the Savior. He will rejoice over you with happy song, he will renew you by his love, he will dance with shouts of joy for you, as on a day of festival (Zeph 3:17-18).*

Can you image God dancing for joy because of you? Do you have the courage to bathe in the warmth of his love unabashed?

The result of such "*musings*" over your aging life will lead you into an ever deeper peace, a security and feeling that will fill you with gratitude and joy that no one and nothing can take from you. Remember what Saint Paul has to say about God's love for you:

*Who then can ever keep Christ's love from us? When we have trouble or calamity, when we are hunted down or destroyed, is it because he doesn't love us anymore? And if we are hungry, or penniless, or in danger, or threatened with death, has God deserted us? For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels won't, and all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, or where we are--high above the sky, or in the deepest ocean--nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ when he died for us (Ro 8:31-39).*

A useful help in discovering the Lord's faithful love and compassion in your life is what spiritual writers call the *Prayer of Reminiscence*. In this prayer we put ourselves consciously into the presence of the Lord and start going through our whole life from the beginning of our childhood up to the present and try to discover the concrete shapes God's love and care has taken in our life. These shapes are usually persons who have loved you, special event or experiences where you really felt his loving presence and protection. We should keep in mind that God's love for us always shows itself in tangible forms and is not just a feeling. In discovering the shapes of God's tangible love you will come to see where God touched you throughout your life's journey toward him. The result of such musing should be a deep gratitude towards God.

Gratitude is the heart of prayer. If you really want to come in touch with God and to stay in touch with him the only language that can truly do that for you is the language of thanks, adoration and, praise. Nothing is more beautiful than a person that has managed to unfold into a grateful person for whom nothing is just accident but for whom everything was and is a gift from God who love us infinitely and cares - as scripture has it- even about losing our hair:

*Not one sparrow (What do they cost? Two for a penny?) can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't worry! You are more valuable to him than many sparrows (Lc 12:6-7; Mat 10:30).*

## **2. The area of your woundedness: the received hurts and your personal mistakes and failures.**

The aim here is to invite you to reflect once again on your life. Here you are asked to face the hurts you have received, the wounds that have been inflicted upon you and the mistakes and the mess you have made yourself. You should come to grips with what you have never really forgiven or, never let heal; those events or persons who have hurt you and have created a sadness or a bitterness in your life. Even today you might still feel a deep resentment within you of which you never let go. Seek to reconcile yourself with God, with yourself and with your fellow human beings who inflicted such hurt upon you. All hurts and thoughts of retaliation and revenge must have an *expiry date*, so to speak. Make sure you put that date before the hurts and wounds in the past have poisoned your life to the point where full recovery without a miracle is not possible anymore.

When, in this reflection, your doubts are too strong to believe that your failings, your mistakes, your damage on yourself and others, in short your sin are really forgiven, then meditate on what the great mystic Julian of Norwich has to say concerning our failings before God:

But often when our failing and our wretchedness are shown to us, we are so much afraid and so greatly ashamed for ourselves that we scarcely know where to put ourselves. But then our courteous Mother does not wish us to flee away, for nothing would be less pleasing to him; but he then wants us to behave like a child. For when a child is distressed or frightened, it runs quickly to its mother; and when it can do no more, it calls to the mother for help with all its might. (chap. 62)

Sin will reveal in the end God's immensity of love. Sin, then is not to be the focus of our attention. We need not be consumed with an image of failure and guilt. These places of failure and pain are the means by which we are opened to God. Sin is the sharpest scourge with which any chosen soul can be struck. It is through facing up to our failures in an atmosphere of love that we are healed. Our courteous Lord does not want his servant to despair because they fall often and grievously; for our failing does not hinder him in loving us." (Chap.39)

Or listen to what the renowned theologian Paul Tillich wrote at the end of his life:

Do you know what it means to be struck by grace? We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by the stroke of grace. It happens or it does not happen. And certainly it does not happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen so long as we think, in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a shaft of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted." Accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything, do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted and infinitely loved. If that happens to us, we experience the grace of God's infinite love and forgiveness.

### **3. The God who remains forever the incomprehensible - whose way of thinking and acting you never understood**

Some of us may have to reconcile themselves to a God they never could understand and who remained so often incomprehensible throughout their entire life. All who have sincerely sought God have, in one way or the other, experienced at times a God whom they could not understand anymore. A God, who kept himself seemingly so distant from all the suffering, hate, violence, and human disaster; from our internal loneliness, pain and often despair that it becomes extremely hard to believe that God exist at all. Or, if God exists, it seems that he could not care less about his creatures. A God, we cannot comprehend and whose behavior at times, appears so irrational and strange that you have been driven to doubt or worse, to despair and even unbelief. The Israelites in the Old Testament knew about such a God. Those who did not despair saw in this behavior God's incomprehensibility. They sought consolation in God's own declaration: *My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways* (Is 55:8). They held on in their faith, often during years of desolation and dryness, to a God whose love would remain unwavering no matter what may happen to them; even when God put them to the test. The most recent example of such a faith in our time is Mother Teresa of Calcutta who had to live that way for almost 40 years of her life.

But the pious would never give up their belief - even contrary to all evidence - that God remains the loving and caring one no matter what their own experience may tell them. The following story is a moving witness of Jewish belief and an example of this unwavering faith in the face of a wrathful and seeming monstrous God:

During the time of the inquisition in Spain a famous Rabbi escaped execution by taking flight in a small boat with his wife and children. While they were at sea a terrible storm broke. The children were thrown overboard and drowned. The boat itself was smashed against the rock of a little island and the Rabbi and his wife were thrown onto the land. At that very moment a bolt of lightning killed the wife. Only the Rabbi survived the ordeal naked, bruised and totally exhausted. In that state he crawled to his knees, raised his hands to God and said:

"God of Israel, I fled to this terrible place because I yearned to serve you undisturbed. I wanted to fulfill your commandments and to sanctify your Holy Name. You, however, have done everything to stop me from believing in you. If you think you will succeed in diverting me from my way, I will tell you now, God of my fathers, you shall never succeed! You may beat me, you may take away from me the most precious and most valuable things I possess in this world, you may torture me to death - I shall always believe in you, I shall always love you - no matter how you treat me.

These are my last words, you wrathful God: You will not succeed! You did everything to kill my belief in you and make me despair. But I will die as I have lived with a firm faith in you. I will hold on to my fathers' unwavering faith: "Listen Israel, the eternal is our God, the unique and the only God, and you shall love your God with all your heart and all your soul!" I will love you in spite of whatever you do to me, you incomprehensible God.

It has been this faith through all the centuries that saved the Jewish people from being annihilated. Absolute nothing seemed to be able to deter them from their creed:

*"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates (Deut 6:4f).*

Pray all the time to God that your faith becomes so strong that you can praise God as the loving and forgiving One no matter what your life's experience may have been to the contrary. Because only in praise and thanksgiving will you be able to stay in contact with him and not be driven to despair even though you cannot comprehend his actions and behavior anymore.

#### **4. Christian life is only understandable from its future fulfillment in the life to come.**

It has been said by so many spiritual writers of all religions and saints that the deepest desire of every human heart is union and communion with God. Rediscover anew this deep hunger for God and the longing for union with him. Christian tradition has always regarded this hunger as a longing for the coming of the Lord in joyful expectation at the end. It is a waiting for what God has prepared for you from the beginning of the world (1 Cor 2:9). Christian life, by its very nature, lives from this eschatological outlook towards the future. From the future Christian life receives its hope. In the light of this hope we can find the courage to let go and not to cling desperately to our life here on earth. It is that age old hope that found its expression in the Third Eucharistic Prayer where the Church community prays: *We wait in joyful hope for the coming of our savior Jesus Christ. All anxiety and fear, which are connected with death, should give way to trust and confidence in God who will be waiting for you when you come home and who will slaughter the fatten calf for a feast out of joy, for you who have finally come home where you belong (see Luke 15).*

## **The great surprise is still coming**

A parish priest in a rural area told me once the following story. "In my parish there once lived an old lady, a little odd, yet a good Christian. I visited her regularly. One day she asked me: 'Father, I have a favor to ask you. When I die and they put me in the coffin and lay me out in our parish church for the funeral ceremony, please, don't let them put a rosary or a crucifix in my folded hands. No, I want you to make sure they put a fork into my hands. And I beg you, when you give the homily during my funeral mass, tell the people the reason why I wanted to be buried with a fork and not with a rosary or a crucifix in my hand as usual.'

Eventually the woman died and I did what she wanted me to do for her. I made sure they put a fork into her folded hands. The people wondered about it but thought it fitted her having been always a little odd. As promised I told the congregation the reason why she was laid in the coffin with a fork in her hands instead of the usual rosary or crucifix. I said, 'This is what our dead sister wants to tell us about the fork in her hands. She said to me: "Father, my family was very poor and there were many hungry mouths to feed. Our daily meals were often miserable. But on Sundays we would all be invited by our grandmother who lived not far away for a meal. She would cook for us all a delicious meal which made up for so many meager ones during the week. But what we children were really looking for was the desert grandma would proudly present after the main meal was over. It was always the surprise we children waited for all through the week. Once the main meal was over and the table was cleaned grandma would say: "Now children, keep your forks ready - the surprise of the week is coming." Our eyes would sparkle and with great joy we would watch when she proudly carried her desert to the table." And what a surprise!

Now Father, tell the congregation that all my life as a Christian I have been waiting for the great surprise the good Lord has prepared for us all when we die. I want to be ready for the great banquet after my death. Therefore, I want to have the fork in hand when I enter this great banquet hall, because for me, the great surprise of the Lord will be brought in at any moment.

Figuratively speaking, we elders in the Christian community should go around with a fork in our hands waiting with eager expectation for the great surprise the Lord has prepared for us when we enter the great hall of the eternal banquet. We should inspire the young ones by living in a way that indicates without any doubt the direction of the Christian life: the final coming of the Kingdom of God in glory. It is definitely not out of step if we, the elderly ones, would conclude our prayer not so much with an *Amen* but rather with the early Church's fervent and joyful acclamation: *Maranata, Lord Jesus come!*