

The Fragility of Life
& the Reality of Aging and Dying
with Fr. Jim Heft, S.M.



Friday, February 19th at 7:00 p.m. PST
VIA ZOOM ONLY

Prayer for the Grace to Age Well

When the signs of age begin to mark my body
(and still more when they touch my mind);
when the ill that is to diminish me or carry me off
strikes from without or is born within me;
when the painful moment comes
in which I suddenly awaken
to the fact that I am ill or growing old;
and above all at that last moment
when I feel I am losing hold of myself
and am absolutely passive within the hands

The Fragility of Life and the Reality of Death

Introduction

Over the past year, Covid has made us all more aware of how much we need the presence and touch of loved ones. It has also made us more aware of the fragility of life. And it has also made some of us think more about death. What kinds of thoughts invade our minds when we think about dying? What do we believe about death and what happens next?

Getting Older. As a young priest in the Society of Mary, I sat in chapel next to an 80-year-old priest, Father Edwin Leimkuhler. In the 1950s, he was a national leader in creating theology courses adapted to college students. Until then, theology was taught only in seminaries. He also was instrumental in bringing Erma Bombeck, an undergraduate at the Marianist University of Dayton, into the Church. When I knew him, he was still active and would always climb stairs two at a time, muttering repeatedly, "never get old."

Despite Father Leimkuhler's warning, getting older can offer us opportunities for further growth. Writer George Eliot remarked that "it is never too late to be what you might have been." From the opposite direction, others have thought that we do not change as we get older; we just become more clearly ourselves. Filled with confident hope, we might say of aging what May Sarton wrote: "Old age is not an illness, it is a timeless ascent. As power diminishes, we grow toward the light." Or with Father Leimkuhler, we might say, with a smile, "I'll never make the mistake of turning 80 again."

I am 78 now, but am still teaching and enjoying good health. Unless I am blessed with a sudden death, I think I may find the increasing limitations of getting older hard to accept. I have experienced few such limitations in the past. I might start mumbling, "never get old!" However, one of the benefits of religious life is that we can work for as long as our health permits. When the time comes to begin cutting back on our activities, we can do so gradually and, I would hope, gracefully.

However, everyone is not cut from the same cloth. We have some brothers in my order, the Marianists, who fight tooth and nail to avoid going to one of our retirement communities. Some resent not being allowed to drive anymore. After many years of vibrant and fruitful apostolic ministry, some feel that their diminished energy makes them not as useful as they used to be. The difficult transition from doing to being is inescapable. Of course, we say 70 is the new fifty and do too many things to look even younger than 50. Vanity is as common among the old as it is among the young. We still need to face the truth: getting old is not for the faint of heart. On the other hand, I also see some brothers who make the transition willingly and gracefully. They are a great encouragement to me.

Saint John Henry Newman (1801-1890) did not like getting old. In his 80s, in a letter to a friend, he wrote, "I speak with difficulty. I can hardly walk, never without the chance of tripping up. I, with great difficulty, go up and down stairs. I read with discomfort. I cannot write except very slowly, and I am deaf." Though his mind did not work as quickly as before, he explained that "except in failure of memory, and continual little mistakes in the use of words, and confusion in the use of names, I am not conscious that my mind is weaker than it was." Still, Newman continued, "like other old men, I am so much the creature of hours, rooms and of routine generally, that to go from home is almost like tearing off my skin, and I suffer from it afterwards."

Despite all these inescapable effects of aging, our hearts can remain apostolic, our prayers focused on the mission and our desires rooted in the Gospel. Shortly before her death, Dorothy Day made this entry in her diary: "No matter how old I get..., no matter how feeble, short of breath, incapable of walking more than a few blocks what with heart murmurs, heart failures, emphysema, perhaps, arthritis in feet and knees, with all these symptoms of age and decrepitude, my heart can still leap for joy as I read and assent to some great truth enunciated by some great mind and heart."

I am old enough now to have accompanied some of our brothers in the last years, weeks and even days of their lives. Some, as they weaken and face their death, put it all in the hands of God, and remain peaceful and grateful. Others, also exemplary religious, suffer doubts, becoming anxious and afraid. Some plunge into a dark hole of depression and feel alone. Some worry that their lives were not as virtuous as they should have been, that too much of their ministry was laced with ego, that their passion for the mission was as much for the praise of others as it was for building God's kingdom. Some wonder whether they are truly forgiven, or even have doubts as to whether there is a next life. Some are resentful. Remember Luke's parable of the younger brother who went off and lived wildly, and the older brother who resented him. Harboring resentments, however, is like letting someone live rent-free in your head. Without forgiveness and generosity, people sour.

Struggles and doubts like these are not as unusual as some people might think. We shouldn't airbrush the process of aging. Learning how to let go is not easy. It is in the midst of such struggles that we need to see with the eyes of faith, even if those eyes see through a glass only darkly (1 Co. 13:12). We sing, do we not, that we live by faith and not by sight? Let us be moved by the example of Mary at the foot of the cross. There Jesus said to the beloved disciple and to all of us, "Behold your mother." It makes sense, then, to look to Mary as we make our own way through this life. If we keep our eyes focused on her, she will direct our gaze repeatedly to Jesus, for He remained the center of her long life. She, like all good people of faith, tell us to "do whatever He tells us." In the Hail Mary, we ask her prayers "now and at the hour of our death." So, she prays for us now and especially at the moment of our deaths. Let us continue to help each other along this graced journey, realizing that our lives never end, but do through a brilliant change, welcomed as we will be, by God and all those who have gone before us marked by the sign of faith—parents, friends, and loved ones.

James L. Heft, S.M. February 21, 2021

Covid, the Fragility of Life and the Reality of Death

Zoom, Holy Family, 7:00 PM, 2-19-21

Introduction

I have never given a talk like this, which is all the more reason that giving it with a “live” audience would help me read faces and determine quickly if I were missing the point or shooting air balls, to use a basketball slang for missing the basket completely. Also, I don’t like talking about a subject I have never experienced—death. I will say more about that later.

Outline: I. Covid: the Fragility of life
 II. Aging and the search for wisdom.
 III. Death: Preparing for it and Faith in the next Life

I. The Covid Isolation Cage

For some, we worked at home, watched more Netflix, read more, forgotten how to dress up, spent more meals at home and time with kids (though with school age kids it could be very difficult—especially for mothers). We have been able to stay in touch through various means.

For some others, huge inequities. Those who had to take risks: Health care and fire workers, police, transportation, stores owners and workers—many of these people are also poor (essential workers). Deaths of Hispanics, 3 to 1. Life is precious and fragile. Some lives more fragile than others.

We all have had to become super careful, masks (can’t see other peoples’ expressions), no touching but awkward elbow bumping is OK, social distancing—when did we learn that phrase? These days for Catholics are anti-incarnational and non-sacramental and non-communal.

The virtual is unable to substitute for the real. Especially **terrible for those of us with family in nursing homes.**

Imagine if we had no cell phones, no zooms, or Skype. Imagine no internet (people—USC students in TX, no heat) and being reduced to writing letters?

For me, more personally

Just being cooped up—I haven't been on a plane for a year!

For me, it started out as a sabbatical/a second novitiate, but ended up feeling like living in a cage, being cut off from my family and so many of my friends (One of my sisters went through some health challenges...and I couldn't be there for her).

Personally, I missed so much celebrating mass and preaching and teaching in person. Preparing sermons is one of the best ways I know how to pray. When I preach, I preach to myself and let others eavesdrop. Such contact is the life-blood of my vocation. I feed off that interaction. I miss it and you all terribly. This zoom is a poor substitute, but better, I trust, than nothing!

II. The reality of Aging

Aging: Confucius studied intensely while working as a clerk and a zookeeper. As he remarked toward **the end of his life**: “What I was thirty I began my life; at forty I was self-assured; at fifty I understood my place in the vast scheme of things; at sixty I learned to give up arguing; and now at seventy I can do whatever I like without disrupting my life.” Comment on this.

Fifty years ago, led by some USC researchers, gerontology became an important area of longitudinal research that burgeoned into **life cycle literature**...

For example, some of that research described **Young people**, who tend to have an **open-ended sense of the future**, typically pursue what some researchers call a “**knowledge trajectory**”; they are interested in **careers and the acquisition of information** (and, brain studies also show, they seem to hold on to negative emotion more tightly). **Older people**, as a rule, have a **shorter time horizon**. Confronted with their own **mortality and that of family and close friends**, they more typically pursue a **trajectory** that emphasizes **emotional richness and social connection**. P. 69

Some Good News: Psychological research has shown that **older adults feel more comfortable than younger adults do when dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity**, surely one of the fundamental strengths of a **wise temperament**. It has shown that **older adults are more supple than young adults in their assessments of problems**; they are able to perceive the social context of a situation better than younger adults, and to adjust their actions accordingly.

And perhaps most important, when it comes to settling on a strategy of action, they display greater flexibility, guided in part by their ability to regulate their emotions. They develop a “feel,” something akin to **emotional intuition that lets them know when it is best “to do” and when it is best to “let it be.”** P. 238.

Wisdom in Scripture Solomon

King Solomon and Wisdom: (2 Chronicles 1:10 NLT) **“Give me the wisdom and knowledge to lead them properly, for who could possibly govern this great people of yours?”**

King Solomon of the Old Testament is **synonymous with wisdom**. (2 Chronicles 1:11-12 NKJV)

And God said to Solomon: “Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked riches or wealth or honour or the life of your enemies, nor have you asked long life; but have asked wisdom and knowledge for yourself, that you may judge my people over whom I have made you king; (12) wisdom and knowledge are granted to you; and I will give you riches and wealth and honor, such as none of the kings have had who were before you, nor shall any after you have the like.”

(Proverbs 3:13-18 NLT) **“Joyful is the person who finds wisdom, the one who gains understanding. (14) For wisdom is more profitable than silver, and her wages are better than gold. (15)**

Wisdom and Erik Erikson: Generativity

Erik Erikson identified wisdom as part of the 8th and final stage of life, part of a “meaningful old age,” p. 41. By the time he was in **his upper 80s**, he spoke **more and more about wisdom and generativity**. He characterized **wisdom as empathy, resilience, humor, humility, intuitive knowledge, altruism, generosity, and appreciation of limits**. **Generativity** takes the initiative and responsibility to share with future generation what you have learned in your own lifetime. Generativity strengthens solid values in the lives of the next generation (240)

III. The Reality of Death

Ars moriendi

As I said earlier, I don't like talking about what I have never experienced, except for various times in this life when, usually kicking and screaming, I have had to die to myself, put my ego in check and keep my mouth shut.

We know what it is to be born. Modern biology, explains how babies are conceived and grow in their mother's womb.

We've witnessed births—give the example of assisting at the birth of a baby, catching it (him) as he emerged slowly from his mother womb!

But death? No

The *Ars moriendi* ("The Art of Dying") are two related [Latin](#) texts dating early 15th century offers advice on approaching and preparing for a good [death](#). It was written about 50 years after the terrible infection called the Black Death that wiped out as many of 35% of the entire population of Europe, and nearly 45% of the clergy and religious.

It was very popular, translated into most West European languages, and was the first in a western literary tradition of guides to death and dying.

1. The first chapter explains that dying has a good side, and serves to console the dying man that death is not something to be afraid of.
2. The second chapter outlines the five temptations that beset a dying man, and how to avoid them. These are [lack of faith](#), [despair](#), [impatience](#), [spiritual pride](#) and [avarice](#).
3. The third chapter lists the seven questions to ask a dying man, along with consolation available to him through the redemptive powers of [Christ's](#) love.
4. The fourth chapter expresses the need to imitate Christ's life.
5. The fifth chapter addresses the friends and family, outlining the general rules of behavior at the deathbed.
6. The sixth chapter includes appropriate [prayers](#) to be said for a dying man.

Shortness of Life: Psalm 90. [read several verses]

Rule of Benedict, Tibetan Monks meditate always on death.

Marianist Formulary: read sections from the "Preparation for death," which I did regularly beginning at the age of nineteen.

Facing Death

My privilege of being with many who are dying

Prayers, touching and kissing and holding another's hand

Confusion, fear, anxiety, doubts, regrets...don't airbrush aging or dying.

Sacred, silent, powerful time.

One Approach: Singing

Singing in the face of Death: In the Gospel of Matthew, at the end of the last supper, we read that "When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." Jesus and his disciples prepare for what lies ahead by singing. They sang songs of praise and thanksgiving. One of those traditional Passover Psalms ends with: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." Then His passion begins.

An Arabic proverb: "When danger approaches, sing to it."

It was reported that in **February of 2015 when 21 Egyptian Coptic Christian** were beheaded by Daesh on a beach in Libya, **they died singing a song to Jesus.**

For some of us, when faced with great crises and desolation, the only **resource is poetry and music.** *Alive in God, 249.*

Most Important: Believe in the Scriptural Testimonies

God's Love Doesn't let go!

Romans 8: 35-39: Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Trial, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or the sword? As Scripture says: 'For your sake we are being slain all the day long; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered. Yes in all this, we are more than conquerors because of him who has loved us. **For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor depth nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.**'

The Sacramental Reality

Romans 6: 3-4, 8-9: "Are you not aware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Through baptism into his death we were buried with him, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life.... If we have died with Christ, we believe that we are also to be raised from the dead, will never die again; death has no more power over him."

The Next Life?

1 Cor. 2: 6-10: There is to be sure a certain wisdom which we express among the spiritually mature.... It is God's wisdom: a mysterious, a hidden wisdom. God planned it before all ages for our glory.... Of this wisdom, it is written: "**Eye has not seen**, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him. Yes God has revealed this wisdom to us through the Spirit. The Spirit scrutinizes all matters, even the deep things of God.

Last Word: In the Meantime

Dorothy Day: "No matter how old I get...no matter how feeble, short of breath, incapable of walking more than a few blocks, what with heart murmurs, heart failures, emphysema perhaps, arthritis in feet and knees, with all these symptoms of age and decrepitude, my heart can still leap for joy as I read and suddenly assent to some great truth enunciated by some great mind and heart. (Duty of Delights, Kindle edition, location 271).

Give a summary of your main points, thank everyone for tuning in,
and invite questions and reflections.

Jim Heft, SM 2-19-21