Love is the Dream: Christian Spirituality & Ageing

The psychological developmental tasks of ageing

Some people may feel that psychology has been substituted for spirituality in our modern society and that it disparages the gift that spirituality offers to us. However, knowledge of these theories allows us to understand normal human developmental stages and alerts us to areas that may need healing later on in life, especially if a person has suffered a significant trauma. Gerald May, in his book *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit: A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction*, writes: 'In essence then, legitimate spiritual guidance involves a full acceptance of the physical and psychological nature of human beings and an informed, caring response to the manifestations of that nature. But it is also continually and consciously rooted in mystery and in an awareness of graced furtherance of the person's life in and towards God.' (p. 31). In the twentieth century various psychological theories about human development have been posited by Jean Piaget, Daniel Levinson, Carol Gilligan and Jean Baker Miller and others. Although some of the theories look at the differences between masculine (Levinson) and feminine (Gilligan and Miller) development, all of them ultimately stress the need to develop personal relationships born out of a secure sense of self and, ultimately, going out of oneself in service to the wider community and promoting the good of the entire world. The more we know about normal human development, the better able we are to provide people with the spiritual resources and support they need along the way either when problems arise or when people are confused or unsure as they move from one stage to another.

One of the most famous and influential theories which explain human development over the entire life span is Eric Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development. See the reference at
http://psychology.about.com/library/bl_psychosocial_summary.htm

The stages are:
1. Trust vs mistrust (infancy);
2. Autonomy vs. shame and doubt (2-3 years);
3. Initiative vs. guilt (preschool);
4. Industry vs. inferiority (school age);
5. Identity vs. role confusion (adolescence);
6. Intimacy vs. isolation (young adulthood, 19 – 40);
7. Generativity vs. stagnation (middle adulthood, 40-65);
8. Ego integrity vs. despair (maturity, 65-death).

According to Erikson, each stage has a "crisis" to resolve as indicated by the two choices given. For present purposes we need only consider the last two stages but it should be noted that if a person has not successfully resolved a previous stage, one of the tasks of the older years is coming to terms with that. For example, if a person is unable to trust or establish meaningful relationships, it is possible to assist a person, through counselling or spiritual direction, to come to a resolution which allows them to obtain a sense of integrity and peacefulness. In stage 7 Erikson considers the crisis to be between "generativity and stagnation (self-absorption)." In an article entitled "Hallowing Our Diminishments: Spiritual Guidance in Later Life,"

Susan Sihler writes that: "if unresolved [stage 7], we fool ourselves with a false generativity that hides in busy-ness, or we become indifferent and enter old age withdrawn by self-absorption." (p.48). However, if resolved, we can enter old age "with a sense of caring …. for the next generation and for leaving a better society and environment to them." (p. 48). In stage 8, the crisis is between "integrity and despair." Here people come to terms with the reality of their life, with its successes and failures, its accomplishments and unfulfilled dreams. Failure to resolve this "crisis" results in melancholy, while successful resolution is identified with wisdom. The questions facing people at these stages of their lives are spiritual questions of life's meaning or purpose. People wonder what legacy they will leave behind them, not so much in financial terms, but in the impact their life has had upon the world. These are questions which Churches can and should help people to explore at this stage of life.

Stages of Faith Development

In his book *Stages of Faith*, James Fowler uses a developmental approach similar to Erikson's to discuss how a person's faith life develops. "Undifferentiated faith" is the term he applies to infancy. As in Erikson, the importance of being able to trust the caregiver has major implications for later stages of faith development. His stages, compared with Erikson, are as follows:

1. Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith (Early Childhood): The child's faith experience is influenced by the activities and ideas communicated by parents or other significant adults.

2. Stage 2. Mythic- Literal Faith (School Years): "The stage in which the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community. Beliefs are appropriated with literal interpretations, as are moral rules and attitudes. Symbols are taken as one dimensional and literal in meaning."

3. Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Adolescence): "Faith must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements. Faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook." (p. 172). He believes this stage begins in adolescence but many adults remain there permanently. People at this stage conform to the expectations of those in authority and have a core identity but they have not "stepped outside" it to form their own independent identity.

4. Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith (Young Adulthood): This stage may occur in late adolescence but may also occur at midlife. It is a time to "begin to take seriously the burden of responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes." He believes that there are many tensions inherent at this stage between "individuality vs. being defined by a group" or "subjectivity and the power of one's strongly felt but unexamined feelings vs. objectivity and the requirement of critical reflection"; "self-fulfillment vs. self-actualization" and " the question of being committed to the relative vs. struggle with the possibility of an absolute." The person at this stage has an ability for critical reflection.

5. Conjunctive Faith (Mid-life and beyond): This is a stage of integration. He states: "Alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions, this stage tries to unify opposites in mind and experience….And with the seriousness that can arise when life is more than half over, this stage is ready to spend and be spent for the cause of conserving and cultivating the possibility of others generating identity and meaning."

6. Universalizing Faith: Fowler believes that there are few people who reach this stage. It is a stage where people are willing to be martyred for their belief and work for the common good.

Support

For those who are leading discussion groups or listening to a person's faith journey, it is important to keep these stages in mind. Coming to terms with one's faith and beliefs, particularly at stage 4 or stage 5, may cause a person great concern and it is helpful to be able to "normalize" the process with him or her. When I worked at a University in the U.S., many of the students who went on retreat were transitioning from stage 3 to stage 4. I used to describe this to them as the "quicksand period" in which the way they prayed as children no longer worked and they had not discovered a different way of praying. Their response was to "jump ship" and declare that God was no longer important (though *spirituality"* was for many who declared themselves "spiritual but not religious"). However, as we explored together and meditated on the Scriptures, they began to realize what was happening: they

were growing up in their faith and making it their own faith, not the "Church's faith" or their "parents' faith."

The same thing may be happening to people in their retirement years as they integrate their life's events. Asking people to think about their images of God and how those images were formed is an interesting way to help people struggling in a crisis of faith. Many people are surprised at what they discover and the discussion that can take place may lead people to a place of mercy, forgiveness and compassion as they move from an image of a judgmental, stern, strict God to the God of mercy and compassion and unconditional love. Jesus said: "I have come that you may have life, life to the full." (Jn.10:10).

Our journey of faith can lead us ever deeper into that fullness to which God invites us.

This article is additional material to our publication 'Love is the Dream: Christian Spirituality & Ageing' by Sr Joan Kerley, FMSJ. The booklet is part of a series supporting the spiritual needs of older people. It can be purchased by visiting the Bookstore