

AGING *in His Grace*

ST. BENEDICT ORTHODOX CHURCH
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WEEK 4 ~ Encountering God in Old Age (and Dementia)

I. Finding Transcendence in Old Age

- Many find new revelations in old age...but what about people with dementia?

II. What About Dementia?

- Dementia: An irreversible and degenerative disease in the brain, which affects one out of eight adults over 65. The brain degenerates: all memories disappear. Elicits: strange behaviors, aimless wandering, uninhibited emotions, depression..
- Some wonder: "Is this still the same person I knew?"

III. Transcendence: From I to Thou

- Theosis involves a process of ego-transcendence, an odyssey from Self to Other
- "The fact that human persons are created in the image of God signifies first and foremost an orientation, a direction, a relationship." ~ Kallistos Ware
- What does this look like in Old Age?

IV. Transcendence Towards God

- "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." ~ St. Augustine
- Prayer: "Frail and physically limited in their movement and activity, [residents of a nursing home] may use prayer as a private activity through which they may find meaning in their lives." MacKinlay
- Dementia?
 - At that point it remains up to us to help inspire moments of transcendence

V. Symbols and Sacraments

- "Liturgy, bread, wine, responsive prayer, cross or crucifix, candles, incense, stained-glass windows, prayer beads, music and even the vestments of the worship leader are all strong memory cues into worship." - *Eileen Shamy*
- Dementia care reminds us that our cognitive faculties play a very small role in our overall spiritual wellbeing.
- The sacraments are a passage into life. They unite broken humanity with God.

VI. Transcendence Towards One Another

- “I become truly a person only when I look into your eyes and allow you to look into mine.” Kallistos Ware
- Isolation in the Retirement Home...
- Positive social relations have the opposite impact and can even slow down dementia drastically.

VII. Transcendence Towards Nature

- “Seeing Jim in the chapel opened my eyes to other realms where the soul is called on, and held, and stilled, in attention and communion... he was held in emotional and spiritual attention – in the contemplation of nature or art, in listening to music, in taking part in the Mass in chapel – the attention, its ‘mood’, its quietude, would persist.” ~ Oliver Sacks

VIII. Nature and Man

- In our dualistic society, we easily forget about our relationship with creation. Genesis informs us that we are not merely the breath of God. We are dust inspirited by God
- “All things teach us and lead us to God. All things around us are droplets of the love of God... Beautiful moments predispose the soul to prayer.” ~ St. Porphyrios

IX. The Person is Still Alive

- At every stage of human development or conscious state, a person is still alive, and maintains the same propensity to encounter God
- We must learn how to see
 - When we look at an apple or river, do we see something boring or ordinary? Or do we see something that inspires AWE?
 - Likewise, the effects of dementia and other age-related disorders can be so profound and upsetting that it is often easy to lose sight of the person underneath.
- My journey in geriatrics
 - Gradually, I ended up discovering the person beneath the disease. I stopped seeing “victims of disease.” I began to see *persons*.
- If we can slow down and lovingly dedicate a little time to the forgotten soul...
 - ... We can start to discover the sublime beauty of aged eyes, the deepest, most authentic smile, the plain and simple splendor of God in another person.
 - Our challenge is to search for the sublime in the common and ordinary.