



THE MINISTRY OF GRATITUDE

A Reflection on Aging by Mary Ann Buckley, SHCJ
with reference to Pope Francis' catechesis to his
General Audience, 15 June 2022

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A familiar sentence came to me in a new way, gratuitously, on my recent birthday. The sentence was that wonderfully expansive, galvanizing first line of our SHCJ constitutions: "God has chosen to need men and women in every age to reveal divine love, to make known the reality of the Incarnation." But what I heard on this particular birthday was: "God has chosen to need men and women **of** every **[chronological]** age ... to make known the reality of the Incarnation." Just the change of a preposition and the insertion of an adjective opened a door and made a world of difference. It told me I'm to offer my own process of aging in mind and body to God's desire to extend the reality of the Incarnation.

Pope Francis seems to be doing that more and more visibly these days in his audiences and persistent travels. Reflecting on Jesus' cure of Peter's mother-in-law, he notes that "*when one is old, one is no longer in control of one's body The vigour of the body fails ... even though our heart does not stop yearning ...*" He goes on to talk more about older people for whom illness triggers thoughts of death and even feelings of bitterness and loss. He calls the increasing number of elders in the world a "*demographic winter.*" Then he shifts to the story of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus makes the point that life is always precious, and puts the old woman back on her feet. Upright once more, she proceeds to serve all her visitors.



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Francis maintains that she too is making a point, which is that "*even in old age one can, or rather, one must serve the community.*" It is good for elderly men and women "*to continue to cultivate the responsibility of serving*" What's more, the Lord "*restores to them the strength to serve ...*"

What unique "service" does an old person offer? Francis names various characteristics — wisdom, consolation, intercession — and, especially, gratitude, calling it "*... the valuable ministry of gratitude towards God, who forgets no one. The gratitude of elderly people for the gifts received from God during their life, as Peter's mother-in-law teaches us, restores to the community the joy of living together ...*"

But wait! How does Francis' vision bear the weight of such harsh forms of diminishment as dementia, loss of sight, hearing, speech, mobility ...? For many of us, that answer is wrapped in a dark cloud, but it's clear to me that the severity of such diminishment is intolerable apart from a community of loving relationships.

And so, God has chosen to need men and women **of every **[chronological]** age to reveal divine love ... to help others ... to rejoice in the divine presence." (1,4)**