

general directives of the Church to the particular requirements, circumstances and possibilities of the school, centre or group concerned. But whatever method is adopted it should be an interim measure, for as Pius XII stressed in his allocution to mothers, one of the most important ends in view is to prepare the Catholic girls of this generation to do their duty in this respect as the Catholic mothers of the next generation.



LAI D ON THE SHELF—ALONE

AN OLD-AGE PENSIONER

STRICTLY speaking old-age pensioners no longer exist in Great Britain, for a kindly government has replaced the words 'old age' with the pleasanter sounding term of 'retirement'. That is but another example of a change that signifies little, for nothing can banish old age. It is a condition which is inevitable for all but those who die before that time is reached. No kind words or exercise of tact can eradicate it, though much can be done to ameliorate the lot of the aged.

Like all problems, the problems of old age cannot be solved unless they are met with realism, for it is impossible to overcome any difficulty that we refuse to recognize. No soothing words, no refusal to look truth in the face can alter the fact that to be in receipt of a retirement pension is to have started upon the final stage of that journey that leads from the cradle to the grave. A landmark has been reached, a further corner turned and the end has come into sight at last. No matter if another twenty, or even thirty, years of life remain they will be seen by all but the wilfully blind as the beginning of that last steep incline down which the man or woman who has reached it will travel to the grave. Filling in every moment of the remaining time as he may, exerting every ounce of his remaining strength to retain his hold on life, the ageing person knows in the secret places of his heart that he is beaten. He has lived his life, for good or ill, and now his time is running out.

Why is it that the man who was able to work, albeit with increasing difficulty, and to maintain his zest for life until the day

of his retirement came, should feel the burden of his age as soon as his work is done? To arrive at a solution of this question we should recall the close connection existing between the body and the mind. So long as the necessity to work remained, the mind was enabled to force the enfeebled body to carry out the tasks imposed upon it, and the full extent of failing incapacity could be ignored. True, work may well have ceased to be so easy or so delightful as in earlier years, decisions may have been harder to make and concentration needed more effort to attain. Growing physical incapacities and an increase of minor ailments may have made the routine of daily work seem harder to face and perhaps sick leave became more frequent. Every nerve was strained in order to reach the end of the course without faltering and the tension engendered helped to carry the worker to his appointed goal. Once this tension was relaxed, however, mind and body alike responded to the new situation in much the same way as a worn-out piece of elastic that has been allowed suddenly to grow slack. When tension is eased the body ceases to make the effort that is no longer essential, the mind allows this slackening of effort to occur and, taking on the habits of old age, the elderly person feels his age the more! The mind, hitherto occupied with the affairs of work, may use its new-found freedom to occupy itself with the symptoms of advancing age and ill-health which the body presents for its consideration. Even if the work in which the retired person was lately engaged lacked interest, the congenial companionship of colleagues and the pleasure of shared interests and recreations may have been sufficient to satisfy the mind and the emotions and so keep feelings of old age in abeyance. Once lost, such interests may be hard to replace; adjustments are not made so easily at sixty as at twenty-six! It can be seen readily enough that retirement is not an event which will be reached blindfolded and unprepared by the wise. It is a state of life which requires consideration before it is attained even when circumstances make it necessary to leave material arrangements till the day of retirement is at hand. Foresight and planning are required in order to make the necessary adjustments between work and retirement so that the remaining years can be lived in accordance with the will of God.

The first essential in the thought campaign for a successful old age is consideration of the best ways of maintaining a reasonable

balance between effort and relaxation. It is all too easy to give way to the claims of the body without further ado once the need for constant effort has been removed. To think that it matters no longer at what time the retired person arises because there is no longer any work which demands his punctual attention is to give in to old age and indeed to meet it halfway. On the other hand, it may be desirable for the ageing person to allow himself extra periods of rest in order to maintain his strength as long as he be able to do so. Certainly health must be considered, and to refuse to do so or to recognize the growing need for physical care is to increase the nuisance value of the person concerned and probably to bring him more quickly to the old persons' home, which he is likely to fear so greatly. In this matter, however, as in so many others, the ageing person will find that he feels as old as he acts. If he persists in taking on the habits of the elderly before it is really necessary for him to do so he will be likely to reduce himself to a condition of feebleness which cannot be ignored. It is essential, therefore, that our resolutions on this point should include the resolution to take sufficient nourishment. True, that as the body ages less food is needed by it and in some cases the desire for it may disappear. Single people who live alone are most likely to experience this decreasing interest in the *cuisine*. Little amusement is to be found in the solitary preparation of a meal that is to be eaten alone and it all may seem a waste of time and energy. There is no doubt, however, that sufficient food must be cooked and consumed if the worst decrepitude of old age is to be kept at bay. Even though the old person be quite alone and his fate seems to be of no slightest importance to anyone but himself, he has a duty to keep himself alive and well so long as God wills that he remains on earth.

A great temptation may come to the retired man or woman, the temptation to let appearances go once work has ceased. Retired, and perhaps living in obscurity, it may seem to the lonely old spinster or bachelor that appearances do not matter any more. There is no doubt, however, that they matter a great deal, if only because the man or woman who lets himself go in this respect is likely to do so in very serious matters. Often the ageing person finds it needs real effort to keep himself, his clothes and his rooms clean and tidy but it is essential that the effort be made. The effect of bodily appearance on personality, especially on that of women,

has been recognized in modern mental hospitals where female patients are encouraged to try out new hair styles and to choose and wear attractive make-up. The beneficial results achieved by this means have made abundantly clear the importance of giving due consideration to personal appearance. Apart from such considerations, the Christian who knows himself to be a living temple will recognize the importance of keeping that temple clean and, insofar as it be possible, pleasant to behold. Whether or not his appearance has ceased to be of interest to anyone else, he may be sure that it is still of interest to God.

Retirement from professional or other work should not mean that all work is abandoned, so long as any capacity to work remains. Nowadays, indeed, it is only the comparatively few who could afford to live a life of idleness while still maintaining their independence. The majority of ageing people who live alone will find that a great part of their daily work will consist in the cooking, cleaning and mending that hygiene and health demand. Apart from these daily chores and the tiresome daily discipline they may entail, the retired person will be much happier if he has some other form of work which can be a source of interest to him. Many, though no longer able to engage in full-time activity, can find part-time occupation which will serve to keep them from boredom and to augment their pensions. Even when this be impossible there are many occupations which can be carried on at home so long as eyesight and some capacity for movement remain. In this respect foresight is especially desirable and interests and occupations of a sedentary nature should be discovered and cultivated before the time for retirement arrives. Work is ordained by God and even when our working days are done we are not expected to be completely idle. In her book *Clartés sur les Souffrances* Mère Marie des Douleurs, Mother General of the Sisters of Jesus Crucified, tells a story which can well be used to illustrate this point. The writer tells of an elderly woman to whom death was rapidly approaching. After she had been anointed, however, realizing that she had still a few hours to live, she asked her maid to fetch her knitting. Horrified, the girl exclaimed: 'But, madam, you're dying!' Unperturbed, her mistress replied: 'That is no reason to be idle'. Possibly one of the greatest trials the ageing will encounter will be the kindly attitude of well-meaning friends who would deny them any opportunity

to work, except, of course, to perform the daily chores necessary for self-preservation.

In one respect women are likely to be better equipped for retirement and old age than men, for they are more likely to have hobbies of a sedentary nature to which they can turn when the day of retirement arrives. In another respect, however, the ageing spinster is almost certain to have the worst of it. Just because she is a woman her nature has led her to find her happiness in the service of others, whether it be through her paid work or in the many ways in which a mature woman can help those with whom she comes into contact in factory, office, or shop. To the many women who have lived in accordance with their natural make-up the greatest pain of retirement may perhaps be found in the loss of all such opportunities for service. It is painful to have only one's own wellbeing to consider and to be useless will seem to many to be without hope of happiness; to be just a bundle of old clothes left on the shelf to await the end. To indulge in such thoughts would be to make of life a misery, to fail in the great and hidden work that our Lord offers to the ageing and to fail to correspond to the graces which he offers in the last years of life.

Preparation for profitable old age, so largely a matter of clear thinking, will be of little avail unless it includes careful preparation in the realm of the interior life. Indeed, it is only by such preparation that the Christian can use this period of 'inactivity' as the Holy Spirit intends it to be used and so find in it, not inactivity, but vital action, not uselessness but greatest use. No longer capable of taking any part in Catholic action, seemingly reduced to living for himself alone, the ageing person may find himself tempted to yield to the self-absorption that seems the inevitable result of the way of life to which he is reduced. True, he has more time for prayer and for spiritual reading, but unless he has developed a taste for prayer and a love of spiritual things in his younger days this time may avail him little. It is essential, therefore, to establish an interior life amidst the hurly-burly of active living, for only then will the habit of prayer be so firmly established that it will be maintained through the feebleness of old age. Well established and guarded assiduously in middle life, the habit of prayer should withstand all the temptations to abandon it which are bound to be met when old age comes upon us. Indeed, it will be something on which more time will be spent with gladness, if with pain, and

contemplation will surely lead to the desire to be conformed in every particular to the will of God, no matter how much feelings and desires may be in opposition to that will. Through prayer the ageing person will come to see the loss of material happiness and the loneliness and pain which accompany him as both the spiritual tools with which our Lord has equipped him for the work for souls which he is to perform, and the necessary stripping of earthly things which will prepare him for his approaching admission to the courts of heaven. To the aged who pray, our Lady will be very near and they will find comfort in the thought of those years of life on earth that remained to her after our Lord's ascension. Surely all the loving care lavished upon her by St John could not prevent her longing with all her heart for that long-delayed day when she would be re-united with her beloved son. Yet she waited in patience, content to take her great but hidden part in the foundation of the Church, peaceful and happy in her obscurity because, as ever, she lived for nothing but the will of God.

Prayer is work and at times it may be that the work will seem to the aged to be heavy. He will be glad of the labour involved, however, for it will bring with it the assurance that in inactivity he can be most active. There are many ways of prayer which can be used by old people. To one the constant repetition of the rosary will be the surest form of prayer and one that can be used for many intentions. Another will be drawn to the recitation of part or the whole of the divine office, either in Latin or in one of the many forms in which it can be had in the vernacular. Those who use the breviary know that, even on the saddest day, the heart is lifted by some verse of a psalm, some theme of the liturgy. Not that the office is said with the intention of gaining consolation; it is in fact a most certain way of giving to God the adoration that is his due when no feelings of thanksgiving can be aroused. To many the most satisfactory form of prayer will be that which is formless, that prayer which consists in the main of movements that take place in the depths, leaving the conscious mind unmoved. It is through prayer of this nature that the ageing and the lonely are likely to arrive at that consciousness of the presence of God, that certainty of his indwelling spirit within their hearts that will give them the courage to endure. It is then that they will understand the supreme value of suffering endured with love of the will for the redemption of mankind. These moments of awareness

may be fleeting and the joy that they bring transient, but the strength which they impart will remain. It should not be imagined that the old, or for that matter the young, should turn to prayer simply to find consolation; it is God's will alone that should be desired, his service that should be sought in prayer whether that will and that service brings joy or greatest pain.

It is normal for mankind to look forward to the future. In the winter we say 'spring will soon be here' and when spring comes we look forward with pleasure to the long, warm days of summer. When things go badly for them the young look forward to a better job, a happy marriage, or maybe to the opportunity to do some great work for God within the monastic enclosure or through the service of their fellows in the world. Some look forward merely to earthly riches and honours, many hope for the rewards of human love and the few look forward to greater friendship with our Lord. To what may the aged look forward when their suffering is at its height? To failing powers, increasing pain, greater dependence on others, the loss of friends and finally to death. From a human point of view it must be admitted that the outlook is far from cheering. To the ageing, however, especially if they be alone, death takes on a more friendly face. Death, they see at last, is not an end but a beginning. Death is the messenger who will carry them to the gates of heaven. Knowing, as the aged must know, that their only home is God, they will cease to fear the messenger who will call them home, the loneliness and the darkness of that last step of the journey of their life. Looking forward to their eventual flight to God, not solely because they are so wearied with the sorrows of living, they will await the moment of release in peace, remembering the words of our Lord to Julian of Norwich who longed to be with him. 'Suddenly thou shalt be taken from all thy pain, from all thy sickness, from all thy disease and from all thy woes. . . . what should it then aggrieve thee to suffer awhile, seeing that it is my will and my worship?'