

It's Great to be Alive: Retirement and Human Flourishing

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It's Great to be Alive

– *Retirement and Human Flourishing**

Kevin Kelly

Some people dread retirement. They see it as the end of their useful life. It suggests that they are past their sell-by date. It is the final down-hill stage of life before facing death.

Others long for retirement. It promises the luxury of being able to choose how they spend their time, what they do and where they go. It offers the prospect of having the opportunity to do those things they have always longed to do.

For those dreading it, retirement may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Seeing nothing positive in it, they may progressively give up on life and go steadily down-hill physically, mentally and even spiritually. By lacking any will to live, they may actually hasten their own death.

Longing for retirement, though it might sound a more positive approach, could be a sign that a person might be failing to make the most of present reality. They could be losing touch with what some writers describe as 'the sacrament of the present moment'. The grass can always seem greener on the other side.

Perhaps the healthiest approach to retirement is to see it as a continuation of one's life journey, looking forward to its new opportunities for growth and development but also facing realistically the various losses which will inevitably accompany it.

Of course, a happy and long retirement is not simply the product of a positive state of mind. Poor health, sickness and disease can make serious in-roads into the quality of life of people of advancing years, as can social factors which increase their feeling of being vulnerable, marginalized and insecure.

*This article is taken from the recently published *Between Poetry and Politics*, a collection of essays by various authors in honour of Enda McDonagh, Emeritus Professor of Moral Theology at St Patrick's College, Maynooth. The book is edited by Linda Hogan and Barbara Fitzgerald and is published by The Columba Press at €20.00.

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IT'S GREAT TO BE ALIVE

SOME REFLECTIONS ON MY OWN EXPERIENCE

Since I am on the threshold of moving into the process of retirement myself, I will start from my own experience. At the beginning of a retreat I made recently, I was very struck by a phrase in a book I was reading: 'Sit with your reluctance, and see it for what it is.' For some reason, it made me think about two reactions I had shortly before my retreat. In the first instance, someone asked me, 'What are you most looking forward to?' 'Retirement' was what immediately came into my mind. And the very day before my retreat, I received a letter inviting me to a meeting with my archbishop along with other priests round about my age (seventy in June 2003) – to help us think about the practical implications of retirement, whenever that might be in the future. Again, my own reaction was significant. Far from feeling threatened, a bit of me was feeling – wouldn't it be good if the archbishop invited me to retire?

I shared these feelings with my retreat director, since I was disturbed lest whether these two reactions were an indication of some kind of 'reluctance' on my part, a resistance to my ministry as parish priest in St Basil's, a yearning to escape from all the responsibility and work involved. Yet I knew I didn't want a move to another parish. I felt very much at home in St Basil's. Was my reluctance due to some kind of ingrained laziness or a longing to be rid of all the responsibilities involved and a yearning for an easier life? I did not think it was just about that – not totally anyway. Was it linked to a feeling of being overworked – feeling there is no end to the long lists of things to be done? I have to admit that, when I am on my own, I rarely sit down and relax. I always feel there are more things I could be doing.

THE PROCESS OF LETTING GO

My retreat director advised me to stay with my feelings about retirement during the retreat – but perhaps to see them in a positive light rather than negatively. She even suggested that 'retirement' could be a kind of metaphor for reflection during the whole retreat. I followed her advice and I gradually began to understand retirement as a process. In my case that process needs to begin now. I am already in the process of retiring even as I write this article. In fact, the research and reflection involved in it have turned out to be a very valuable element in my own retirement process.

One of the wonderful gifts of the parish I am in is the way so many people share in the ministry, activity and running of the parish. In Vatican II language, there is plenty of 'collaborative ministry'. Together we share responsibility both for the running of

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the parish and for the various forms of ministry which make up the life of the Church. It began to dawn on me during my retreat that the process of my retiring as parish priest could be a further important step in the development of collaborative ministry in the parish. In some way or other, all the parishioners should be involved in my retirement process. For the whole parish to take a full part in this retirement process could be an important growth experience for everyone, myself included. Obviously, all dimensions of the life, ministry and mission of the parish would need to be looked at to ensure that these were being properly catered for in the process of my 'letting go'.

However, the process would need to go far beyond making sure that all the structures of parish ministry are properly maintained. One of the challenges for any parish today lies in coming to terms with its mission as Church in the local neighbourhood and town, as well as its social responsibilities, national and international. We are living in exciting times in the Church. God's spirit seems to be calling us to greater vision and a renewed commitment to share our faith and bring gospel-values into everyday life at all levels. If my retirement process is to be a 'growth experience' for the whole parish, the parishioners need to do far more than keep things ticking over. They need to grow even more alive and show even greater dynamism and vision. It would also be important that young people should feel part of the process and be given the freedom to make their unique contribution, however disturbing some older ones (like me!) might find it.

In God's providence, part of the uniqueness of St Basil's is that we share the same church with the Anglican parish, All Saints. In fact, both communities usually call themselves by the same name, St Basil and All Saints. Over the past twenty years since our purpose-built shared church was opened, our two communities have tried to share deeply in all sorts of ways, gradually growing more and more together as one community. I look on the vicar, Guy Elsmore, and his wife and family as very precious friends and we collaborate very closely in our pastoral and liturgical planning and decision-making. Our lives, ministry and mission are bound up with the people of each other's parish, as well as with the life of the local community. If my retirement process is to be a growth experience for St Basil's, it needs to have a similar impact on Guy and the parishioners of All Saints. Hence, they too should be intimately involved in my retirement process.

ORGANIZED PROGRAMME

At present, a relatively small group of parishioners are responsible for much of the organized life and pastoral ministry in the parish.

If the only outcome of the kind of retirement process I am envisaging is that these willing people end up taking on extra work and responsibility, it would be far from beneficial to the parish. There is no way most of these people could do any more. That is why as many parishioners as possible need to be involved in the retirement process. In turn, that might call for an organized programme of lay-formation to equip people for the kind of ministries they will be undertaking. Since such a programme could help people to see how their involvement fits into the wider picture of ministry, thus increasing their sense of contributing and belonging, maybe one of my top priorities in the next few years should be getting a wide-ranging programme of lay-formation and ministerial training off the ground. People already retired in the parish would seem obvious candidates for this kind of involvement. However, ironically, many such people find their time 'to do what they want' severely limited by their child-minding commitments as grandparents (though looking after their grandchildren – within limits! – is exactly what they want to do).

I could imagine some parishioners thinking, 'Such a retirement process is fine while Kevin is still with us. What about when he finally goes? Will our increased ability to look after most aspects of parish life on our own be leaving ourselves open to a succession of older parish priests nearing retirement?' In reality, regardless of any positive retirement process, that is almost bound to happen, given the increasing age of priests in the archdiocese – and in the UK and Ireland as a whole. That makes greater collaborative ministry even more important and urgent.

However, if the retirement process I envisage is even moderately successful, St Basil & All Saints could contribute towards providing a helpful model for parish life, not just ecumenically but also at the level of pastoral ministry. What would matter most would not be the age of the parish priest but the active involvement and co-responsibility of the parish community. In fact, the parish could end up by seeing more younger faces around, if one fruit of an effective retirement strategy was that a pastoral placement here became a valuable optional component in ministerial formation in the archdiocese. Moreover, it goes without saying that such formation would be as much the responsibility of the parishioners as of the parish priest.

It is possible that this shared retirement process might work out so well that I would be able to continue even longer as parish priest, despite my increasing limitations due to age and poor health. However, I suspect it would be better for the parish – and for me – if I were to go sooner rather than later. After all, for myself I envisage retirement not as giving up priestly ministry, but

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as growing into a different mode of being a priest. Who knows what that might be? More writing perhaps? Or more CAFOD involvement? Or being available as a kind of theological or pastoral sounding board for people? Or perhaps just sitting back and enjoying life and the wonderful people God has shared with me as part of my life?

LIFE AFTER RETIREMENT – STAGNATION OR GROWTH?

It is sometimes said that when we retire we can do what we always wanted to do. That is hardly flattering about the way we have exercised our freedom up to this point in life. A good friend of mine always insists that all through life he has tried to do what he wants to do. And he suggests that is true of most people. A mother sitting by the hospital bedside of her desperately ill child is doing what she wants to do. At that moment, in that particular situation, there is nowhere else she would want to be. Admittedly, when her daughter is back home and better again, by that hospital bedside is the last place that mother would want to be. Loving exposes us to a lot of pain and makes us very vulnerable. Yet loving is what we have chosen to do. In that context, disengagement for more radical engagement suggests that we become more focused in our loving. Perhaps, in that sense, it might be true to say that retirement offers us the opportunity to do what we have always wanted to do. Our changed circumstances, though they may be more limiting in some respects, enable us to concentrate on what we regard as the most important priorities in our lives. That is why retirement can be a most enriching time of life. We do not retire from life; we retire deeper into life. In fact, retirement is sometimes described as a process of disengagement for more radical engagement, a time for refining one's priorities.

A lot of things change in the life of a person who retires. Though some of these changes may be very welcome, at least in the early years of retirement, others will be experienced as losses which touch a person quite deeply. For instance, many losses are linked in some way or other with leaving one's normal occupation, whether this be the workplace, school, hospital, university and even parish. A loss of personal self-esteem and even identity may be felt when one leaves a position where one's competence is recognized and most of one's social contacts are based and which has provided the basis for one's financial security. One may even feel the loss of an ordered structure to one's daily life when one loses the discipline of a daily timetable and the creative stress born of the expectations of others.

If retirement is to be a time of personal growth, it is essential that these losses be acknowledged, properly grieved over and in

this way laid peacefully to rest. Where these losses leave some important human needs unfulfilled, as far as possible they need to be compensated for. Denial that there are any losses involved could be a recipe for disaster.

Christians are familiar with the gospel image of the seed falling in the ground and dying so that new life and growth can emerge. Maybe that image can throw light on the process of retirement. Disengaging to re-engage involves a reordering of priorities. No longer are we tempted to dance to the tune of the expectations of others. We can look more deeply into the meaning of life and thus focus on the things we see to be most important. In a sense, retirement can spark off a further stage of growth in our more authentic self. In a society which bases personal worth on such indices as economic achievement and capacity as a consumer, facing up to retirement can help us to be more aware that we are more than what we do. Our self-identity goes much deeper than our activity.

Many retired people say how much they appreciate the freedom of their new situation in life. Maybe that is a sign they have passed beyond the grief of their loss of work and all that entails and laid it peacefully to rest. However, greater freedom is about more than having ample free time and the ability to set one's own agenda. It is not just about freedom from external constraints. It offers the opportunity for a deeper level of freedom, a freedom for the more important things in life. This can take various forms. For some it may leave them free for prophetic risk-taking. Seeing more to the heart of things, they can challenge laws, procedures and rituals which have lost or come adrift from their meaning. In that sense, retired people can be powerful advocates for change. They have a sufficiently rich treasury of memories to avoid being imprisoned by the rigidities of an unhistorical past. Like the ageing Simeon and Anna, they can interpret the past as a seed-bed of hope and promise. So they are able to read the signs of the times and believe in a future which is in God's gift but in which God has called us to share as his artisans in building.

'SABBATH PEOPLE'

The Jesuit, Patrick Purnell, prefers the expression 'sabbath people' to the more politically correct 'senior citizens'. He is not suggesting that retirement is a time for rest, in the sense of sitting back and doing nothing. Although the Bible pronounces the sabbath holy precisely because God rested on that day, God's rest was not a long sleep-in but consisted in enjoying the goodness and beauty of his creation. Our consumer culture is a restless culture. Advertisers are so busy trying to create new 'wants' with which to whet our appetites for the latest gadgets or computers, people

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have little time or inclination to sit back and simply enjoy the wonder, beauty and simplicity of life.

Another expression for the retired is 'Ulysses people'. This highlights another essential ingredient of a happy retirement, namely, to continue our life-long voyage of discovery by having a searching mind and heart. People also stress the importance of the mind-body interaction and insist that a healthy lifestyle with exercise appropriate to one's age holds the key to maintaining mental alertness throughout the ageing process.

As human persons we are essentially social beings. Eugene C. Bianchi in his essay 'Living with Elder Wisdom' writes that 'creative elders oppose the ageing stereotype of withdrawal from social involvements' and quotes some inspiring examples, including one lady who insisted, 'My aches and pains are less important than my agenda.'¹ All stress that inspiring social contacts and strong social support groups come high on the agenda for making retirement a continuing growth experience. For some, these groups will offer motivational inspiration and help people to maintain their social commitments. For others, they can help to compensate for the loss of former friends. New friendships can also offer a further stimulus for personal growth in retirement. A retired person's increasing dependence on others can in some cases result in the blossoming of new and very profound friendships.

RETIRING GRACE-FULLY: TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY OF RETIREMENT

I am always a little suspicious of spirituality language. I well remember being at a meeting with Enda McDonagh in which someone remarked that the key to spirituality lay in discovering one's inner self. Enda commented: 'When I look within myself, I can never find any inner self. All I can find is a cluster of relationships.'

Made in the image of a trinitarian God, we are essentially relational beings. If spiritual growth has any meaning, it must be about growth in the way we live out the truth of all the relationships, human and divine, which lie at the core of our being human persons. That growth needs to continue all through life, including the years of retirement. A whole variety of factors specific to the retirement and ageing process will affect the way we grow during these years. In that sense it is possible to speak in terms of a spirituality of retirement. However, what we are talking about ultimately is how we grow as human persons during the retirement process.

1. Eugene C. Bianchi, 'Living With Elder Wisdom', *The Way, Special Issue on Ageing*, April 1996, 93-102, at 98.

Retirement can be a time for contemplation, looking at life with eyes of wonder and enjoying its goodness. In a sense, prayer and contemplation are retirement activities. In fact, it could even be argued that retirement offers a very privileged opportunity for experiencing in an even deeper way the mindblowing truth that we are made in the image of God. It can give us the opportunity to grow as sabbath people, that is, people who are thankful for the giftedness of life and for the gift of other people – and ourselves. Appreciation of such giftedness lies at the heart of contemplative prayer. All is sheer gift – and God is all-giving, for-giving. Human growth in the period of retirement will often take the form of a deepening of prayer-life into contemplative prayer, though it might not be recognized as such. The contemplative prayer life of some may perhaps be glimpsed in the way they talk about the great pleasure they get from gardening and how it brings them closer to nature. For others who take up painting or poetry in retirement, it might be seen in the way these creative activities take them out of themselves. For others who are grandparents, their experience of contemplative prayer might be found in the wonder of the gift of their grandchildren and the love they awaken in their grandparents. For others it might be in the way they experience a deeper dimension of life on a long walk, or while listening to a piece of music, or reading a good book. Contemplative prayer enables people to see beneath the surface of life.

And it is not only the beauty and wonder of life they face; they become more aware of the suffering and tragedy that seems so much a part of life. This 'God's-eye view' can make them more tolerant of situations of ambiguity. Similarly, seeing beneath the surface of life can help people to appreciate the goodness of diversity, whether in cultures, or lifestyle, or even in religions. This can even lead to a change in their image of God or the divine. A God of laws and institutions can give way to a more compassionate God whose being is shrouded in mystery rather than enunciated in the precision of dogmatic formulae.

DEPENDENCE

Although initially retirement usually offers a person greater independence, factors such as diminishing strength, mobility, eyesight and hearing along with greater likelihood of sickness and hospitalization may eventually increase the level of a retired person's dependence on others. Active acceptance of dependence need not be seen as giving up the ghost or entering on a period of second childhood. Active acceptance of dependence can be a very important human characteristic, provided it is matched by the dependability of those on whom one is depending. Throughout the whole

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of our lives, we live in a state of interdependence on each other. That is why dependability (reliability, faithfulness etc.) is such a central Christian virtue. God is the utterly dependable one, the faithful one. A powerfully moving expression of this comes from Pedro Arrupe, the former General of the Jesuits. Towards the end of his life, when severely disabled by a stroke and hardly able to speak, he said in a message to his brother Jesuits.

More than ever, I now find myself in the hands of God. This is what I have wanted all my life, from my youth. And this is still the one thing I want. But now there is a difference: the initiative is entirely with God. It is indeed a profound spiritual experience to know and feel myself so totally in his hands.²

Mary Elizabeth Kenel, in her article, 'Preparing for Retirement', draws attention to this phenomenon:

... encouraging others to demonstrate an appropriate level of care toward us and to do so in such a way that the very act of accepting care is in itself an act of caring. Caring behaviour does not denote a one-side dependency. Instead, it is a complex interchange that defines an enduring relationship between persons. Accepting care and resources from another does not transform the recipient into a needy, passive burden. As we prepare to enter the retirement phase of life, let us ask ourselves whom we allow to grace us with the gift of caring.³

RETIREMENT AND THEOLOGY

Is there a theology of retirement? That is a question I was tempted to explore in this article – and it is certainly worth exploring. However, the more I got in touch with the real-life experience of retirement, whether through conversation or reading or personal reflection, the more I came to see that it would be much more interesting to explore retirement as a source of theology. To be even more specific, I began to suspect that, for many theologians, embarking on the process of retirement seems to have had a significant impact on their theology. It is almost as though experiencing the human process of retirement is itself a theological source. Maybe this should not be surprising. After all, if theology is more an activity ('theologizing') than a finished product (e.g. book, article etc), then it is only natural that a major human experience such as the retirement process should strongly influence a

2. *Documents of the 33rd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*, St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1984, 93.

3. Mary Elizabeth Kenel, 'Preparing for Retirement', in *Human Development*, vol 23, Summer 2002, 13-18, at 17.

theologian in his or her doing theology. In these days when the subject tends to be seen as centre-stage, that is only to be expected.

'Retirement theology', if I may coin a phrase to describe this phenomenon, is likely to reflect a number of those features which we have seen to be associated with the retirement process itself. I would suggest that 'retirement theology' might exhibit some of the following characteristics:

more focused – in line with 'disengaging to re-engage', it is likely to be a theology which is not interested in peripheral matters and goes to straight to the fundamental issues to be faced;

a greater sense of the preciousness of time (kairos) – a theology which is not afraid to recognize the need for change in life as part of the on-going process of liberation from oppression; and so a theology with a definite sense of urgency, prepared to seize the present opportunity;

more experience-based – a theology with a greater awareness of and trust in the action of God's spirit in the lives of people;

more pastoral – a theology which is deeply concerned about the pastoral dimensions of theological issues, acknowledging that, in the final analysis, theology is not about abstractions but about living relationships, human and divine;

ready to take risks – a theology which is prepared to think creatively and imaginatively, rather than be held back by an overcautious fear of possible consequences – and so a theology with a greater faith in the future;

more tolerant of diversity – a theology nourished by long and rich experience of life, and so one which is more open to the positive salvific role of other faiths and more likely to emphasize that our primary encounter with God lies in the reality of everyday life rather than in liturgy;

more open to ambiguity – a theology which is prepared to start from where people are and which is more aware of the growth process in life, with all its ups and downs, light and shade; so a theology more prepared to accept *en route* pastoral solutions despite their being tinged by compromise and ambiguity;

more contemplative – a theology which goes below the surface of things and interprets life in a deeper context; hence, one which accepts the giftedness of reality as something to be responded to in terms of gospel values rather than legal and administrative technicalities;

sabbatical – a sabbath theology linked to the contemplative dimension of retirement; a theology flowing from the experience of wonder before the incomprehensibility of God and our own sheer 'giftedness' as creatures; the very activity of theologizing

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itself being our sharing in the divine activity of 'seeing that it is good' and thus at the heart of our being made in the image of God; *a more humble theology* – one which recognizes that ultimately we are in the hands of God and that, in its fullness, God's kingdom is pure gift of God and not some human making.

It would require another article to explore how far these characteristics are reflected in the theological contribution Enda McDonagh has made to the life of the Church in Ireland and worldwide in recent years, as well as to the whole arena of social justice and peace and justice, at home and abroad. Without attempting such a task, I cannot resist making a few comments.

Over the past decade I have increasingly noticed Enda's great gift for being a kind of contemplative presence at various meetings. He has developed a knack for discerning the really crucial underlying concerns in any discussion and can put his finger on just where the heart of the gospel touches these issues. I have seen that at meetings of moral theologians or people involved with HIV/AIDS, especially in the developing world. He has highlighted the urgency of the latter issue through his constant insistence that we are living 'in a time of AIDS'. He has also shown himself prepared to take risks, as for instance, when he floated the proposal that baptisms in Northern Ireland should only be celebrated on an ecumenical basis; or when, in September 2002, he joined forces with Stanley Hauerwas (hardly a natural bed-fellow!) to launch an 'Appeal to Christian leaders and theologians' to make the twenty-first century 'be for war what the nineteenth was for slavery, the era of its abolition.' Likewise, some of Enda's recent outspoken and courageous articles in *The Furrow* on the current painful situation of the Catholic Church in Ireland are not afraid to speak of the sinfulness and woundedness of the Church, though in a spirit of deep humility and discernment. I am also thinking of how the development of his whole approach to moral theology has exhibited the traits of being more experience-based and practical and also more open to ambiguity and appreciative of diversity. One final example: Enda's 'theology from the edges' is a striking example of the profoundly sabbatical quality of his theology.

CONCLUSION

The retirement activity of disengagement for re-engagement in a more focused way sounds rather like a description of the process of conversion and renewal. If that is so, perhaps retirement is not just a passing phenomenon in the Church due to the increasing numbers of ageing priests and religious. Maybe the life-giving potential inherent in the retirement process is actually a sign of the times for the Church in our day. It could be that God's spirit is

calling the Church into a new phase of its continued growth rather akin to the retirement process. Perhaps there has to be a lot of letting go in the Church in all sorts of ways, especially as regards power and structures and even traditional styles of liturgy and Church life. If this is true, such losses will need to be named and owned and even grieved over, if we are to let go of them in a life-giving way.

In writing this article I have been helped by two talks by Patrick Purnell, SJ, and Mannes Tidmarsh,⁴ and by the latter's excellent pamphlet, *Vocation to Retirement*.⁵ Above all, I would like to acknowledge that some of the key ideas in this article have been greatly influenced by the thinking of my good friend, Fr Austin Smith, CP. At the end of 2002 he was awarded an honorary doctorate in Law by the University of Liverpool in recognition of his creative and imaginative ministry as a priest in Toxteth, Liverpool, where he has pushed forward the boundaries of Christian ministry and mission in an area of serious social deprivation and discrimination. Through his respectful presence he has been witnessing to the action of God's spirit in their lives and relationships as they struggled to be true to their individual and collective dignity in the face of unjust and dehumanizing pressures at many levels. I mention this purely because the conferral of such an honorary doctorate is relevant to retirement theology. It is no mere coincidence that Austin, as part of the process of disengaging to re-engage, is embarking on a reflective study of priesthood and its broader ramifications in the light of his own fifty years experience as a priest within the Passionist congregation. That promises to be a work of retirement theology *par excellence*. No doubt we can look forward to something similar from Enda. Retirement theology promises a rich future!

4. Patrick Purnell, SJ, and Mannes Tidmarsh, talks recorded on audio-cassette at Upholland Northern Institute in the 1980s.

5. Mannes Tidmarsh, *Vocation to Retirement*, Occasional Paper No 6, Christian Council on Ageing, Epworth House, Stuart Street, Derby, England.