This is a toast to the International Day for Elderly People on 1st October, each year.

Yes, indeed, the brilliant sunset beckons, well past the final frontier, into the mysterious, great beyond!

Although we have only one life cycle to live, and a tiny speck of human history to cover, to do this gracefully and cheerfully is our prized calling. Aging is the turning of the wheel, the gradual fulfilment of the earthly life cycle, where receiving matures into giving and dying becomes worthwhile.

The Elderly are our Prophets

The elderly are our prophets. Without the presence of old people we may forget we are all aging, from moment to moment. Those advanced in years remind us ceaselessly that, one day, we too will become feeble, maybe, senile and helpless.

Fortunately, the old offer us the assurance of hope. There is no need to be filled with fear and pain, bitterness and despair, severe alienation and self-rejection.
Those rich in years remind us of our ultimate destiny. They are our teachers and restore the link between the broken connections and successive struggling generations. They point to the dangers as well as the possibilities of growing grey. Aging, surely, is not a way to darkness rather it leads us to the treasures of life, tucked away, somewhere, in the innermost recesses of our being; in the folds of our unconscious – almost in myth form, in the ancient past. This is one of the ways how the Bible came to be written, especially the Book of Genesis.

The Old are Memory Banks

Quite providentially, the old are memory banks or reservoirs of heartfelt remembrances. They spin wonderful and amazing stories for us, of yesteryears, on which the present is build. They resurrect the past in all its splendour and glory, for us to savour and enrich ourselves on. Wisdom is in full flow and nostalgia fills the air.

This reality is beautifully expressed in an old Taoist parable, which tells us about a carpenter and his apprentice, who saw a huge oak tree, very ancient and greatly gnarled. The carpenter said to his under-study: “Do you know why this tree is so big and old. The young man said: ‘No...Why?’” The artisan answered: “Because it was useless. If it were useful, it would have been cut down, sawed and used to make furniture. But, because it was, and still is, supposedly useless, it has been allowed to grow. This is why it is so majestic now; you can rest in its dense shade” (Henri Nouwen, and Walter Gaffney, Aging, The Fulfilment of Life, p.71).

Old Age can be the Most Fruitful Time

Take heart, dear friends, you are not going to be thrown into the junk heap, a Home for the Aged, a retirement village, “The Last Resort.” Cast off these fear without much ado!

Be uplifted and exhilarated by old St. Pope John XXIII, opening a fresh window on the Body of
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Christ with Vatican II, and making an ancient Church vibrant with Spirit-power. Recall with gratitude his vibrant and buoyant theme: “Aggiornamento”, “bringing up to date”, or seeing the “signs of the times” are, in this sense, “portents of better conditions”, were one of the key phrases used during the Second Vatican Council. And, an eighty-plus (now St.) Pope John Paul II touched the hearts of millions of youth and brought colour to their lives. What about a horribly wrinkled and twice-bent, Mother Teresa, who brought hope and love to the poorest of the poor, the world over. You may marvel at the last works of Michelangelo, for they are the masterpieces of the master creator. We recall the piercing eyes of the elderly Einstein in his winter years, and the feverish brush of the once evergreen, maverick M.F. Hussain, at 95, radical as ever, creating world-renowned paintings, even movies, ablaze with glory!

Monet continued to paint great canvases at 86. Titian put the last brushstrokes to the “Battle of Lepanto” at 98; Leonardo da Vinci finished his Last Supper at 99. Goethe completed “Faust” at 81. Tennyson wrote “Crossing the Bar” when he was 83. Voltaire was still penning Plays when he died at 84. At 74 Verdi composed “Othello; at 80 he produced “Falstaff”.

At 50 the mind hasn’t yet reached its zenith. At 60 it is at its best. It reaches its nadir well past 85 and more, if it has been razor-sharp and alive, earlier in life.

An Example of Courage and New Youth

A story told by Oskar Kokoschka, about his visit to his London Museum, can help us reach a better understanding of aging. “I was in England during World War I, moneyless and miserable. My wife, who is younger and more courageous than I am, said: ‘Let’s go to a Museum for relief.’ Not only were bombs being dropped on London – but every day we heard of another city being destroyed. Devastation, ruins, the annihilation of a world becoming poorer and sad! That was bitter! I happened to look at Rembrandt’s last self-portrait: so hideous and broken; so horrible and hopeless; yet, so wonderfully painted! All at once it dawned on me: to be able to look at one’s fading self in the mirror – see nothing – and paint
oneself as the nothingness of man! What a miracle! In its bright golden light and stark, shadowy brown contrast, I find courage and freshly-minted youth – bejewelled dew-drops at the crack of dawn. ‘Holy Rembrandt,’ I said. Indeed, I owe my life’s richness only to the artists (Horst Gerson, Rembrandt Paintings, New York, p.478).

Old age can be a ‘growing vision of the light’ and a ‘feeling of being nearer the truth’; it is a time of discovery. This stance is most sensitively expressed by Aldous Huxley, in his description of his first wife, Maria. With his hand on her head, he softly speaks to her: “Let go, let go...go forward into the light. No memories, no regrets, no looking backwards, no apprehensive thoughts about your own or anyone else’s future. Only light! This is pure being, this is love, this is joy!” (Henri Nouwen and Walter Gaffney, Aging: The Fulfilment of Life, p. 82).

**Life is Precious**

A young child saw a tiny sparrow lying dead, on its back. He asked his father in a sad tone, “Why do innocent birds have to die so cruelly?” The answer was prompt and clear: “Everything that lives must die.” The boy asked in dismay: “And, I?” “You too will die one day!” “Why?” The father’s wise reply: “So that, life would be precious, son....Everything that is yours forever is never prized!”

**The Aged are Powerhouses of Prayer**

The Lord is especially close to you, the aged, those who suffer and experience helplessness, and because of this your prayer is especially powerful. Do not fear the lack of eloquence, sighs are more important. Just trust that God’s has a special ear for you on account of your pain. A simple loving glance, a sigh, holding your beads, this is all it takes. “The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest until it reaches its goal, nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds” (Sirach 35:17-18a). “Though the Lord is on high, he looks upon the lowly” (Psalm 138:6). “The Lord is close to the broken-hearted, whose spirit is crushed he will
save” (Psalm 34:19). Those with winter in their hair are called to live out the Ignatian or Jesuit maxim: Live each day, “for the greater glory of God!” Allow your life to unfold, even at snail’s pace, hesitatingly, for this holy purpose.

**Conclusion**

Now, this gold nugget! The sun, that blazing orange ball, leaves all its brilliant rainbow colours behind in the sky, for all to admire and be awed by, before it dips into the ocean.

And, this final fling! “For those who have not loved/Old age is a winter time of loneliness/For those who have loved/Old age is a golden harvest time.” Yes, there’s magical beauty and enchantment in old age!

The last word from Scripture: “The virtuous...will flourish in the courts of our God, still bearing fruit in old age...still remaining fresh and green...” (Ps.92:13-15).

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