

Spirit of Mother M. Anselma Award – May 15, 2011 - Mother M. Ingeborg

It is indeed a joy and privilege to be with you tonight and to give this little talk. When Sister M. Stephanie invited me to be the recipient of the Spirit of Mother M. Anselma Award, I understood to be the receptionist and told her that I would love to greet our guests when they arrive. Well, I was corrected. But I immediately inquired what else was connected with this honor. I was instructed that I had to give the talk also. If we would celebrate at home, I probably would also have to wash the dishes. Not too long ago, I gave a conference and when I asked for questions or remarks, a lady said: “I love to listen to you talk. You have a nice accent.” It was not what I said, but the way I said it. So, I hope you like it, too.

I always loved our Mother of Good Counsel Home. In 1952, when I came to the United States, I lived here during the summer semester that I attended at Saint Louis University. I always felt safe here in our Home. There is an atmosphere of peace, serenity, non-competition, and completeness. Blessed John Paul II speaks about old age as a waiting period to be called by the Lord from “life to life”!

You find at your place the picture of the Good Shepherd, stretching His protective hand over the sheep that takes the last laborious step up the high mountain. The picture is rightly described as “The Final Step.” I had chosen it as my memorial card for my Diamond Jubilee. I chose the text from Romano Guardini. You see it on the back of the card. The Holy Father, Blessed John Paul II, wrote a letter “To the Elderly” in October 1999. For all the elderly, it is a very inspiring and consoling and encouraging letter. You can get it off the Internet.

We elderly have made a long journey up the mountain of the Lord. He has invited us, called us, and protected us all our life. His loving hand protected us from the evil that most certainly was also present. It is represented by the black eagle watching us and trying to attack us on our ascent. But full of trust, we look at the Good Shepherd. The twentieth century, in which we grew up, had its own lights and shadows. But with God’s grace, we stayed on the straight path amidst all the turmoil.

Blessed John Paul II writes: “Childhood and youth are the times when the human person is being formed and is completely directed towards the future, and) in coming to appreciate his own abilities) makes plans for adulthood. Old age is not without its own benefits . . . with the quieting of the passions, it increases wisdom, and brings more mature counsels. . . . Each stage of life has its own beauty and its own tasks.”

Sometimes the young Sisters ask me if I would like to be young again. My answer is a definite “No.” I loved every stage of my life, but I am happy that I am nearing the finish line.

In the Old Testament, old age is often referred to as a special blessing from God. I only agree because it offers more time to prepare for heaven. In itself, it can at times be humorous or even embarrassing, like if you find yourself in some place and you do not remember why you went there, or you meet a person you know well, but cannot think of their name. Our physical health is not always the greatest either. But, nonetheless, old age is the final stage of maturity and a sign of God’s blessing.

The New Testament also speaks about elderly people who are strong witnesses of God’s presence among us, such as Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents of John the Baptist. Simeon and Anna waited patiently for the coming of the Messiah to the Temple. Nicodemus visited Jesus by night. Blessed John Paul II writes: “The service of God has nothing to do with age!”

“To honor your father and mother” is the Fourth Commandment in the Decalogue. It is also the only commandment to which a promise is attached: “So that your days in the land which the Lord your God gives you may be long” (Dt. 5:16). When the old people are respected and loved, they feel a lot better.

The Holy Father also writes that it is great if the possibility exists that the elderly can live and be taken care of at home. But he writes: "There are situations where circumstances suggest or demand that they be admitted to homes for the elderly where they can enjoy the company of others and receive specialized care." He mentions Religious Communities that are devoted to the care of the aged.

At this stage of our life, we may also experience suffering through illness or loneliness. But God always gives us the grace to unite ourselves with love to the suffering of His Son. And we always know it will not last forever) heaven is in sight.

Death is the reality we all have to face because of original sin. It was not part of God's plan. Blessed John Paul II writes about death: "Death presents a certain dark side which cannot but bring sadness and fear. . . . Man has been made for life. . . . It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence becomes most acute. Not only is man tormented by pain and by the advancing deterioration of his body, but even more so by a dread of perpetual extinction." Thus we have to ask the question: "What is on the other side of the shadowy wall of death? Does death represent the definitive end of life or does something lie beyond it?" St. Luke says: "God is not God of the dead, but of the living" (Lk. 20:38). Jesus said: "I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die" (Jn. 11:25-26).

Thus faith shines light on the mystery of death and brings peace to old age in facing death. We do not need to fear a dreadful death, but can look forward to a fulfilled promise. We have to prepare through prayer and abandonment into the hands of God, our loving Father.

On the picture in front of you, the sheep has only a very short distance to climb to reach the Shepherd. This distance seems steep, dangerous, and full of thorny shrubbery. The sheep does not look into the dangerous abyss, does not look to the slippery sides, but with calm trust looks into the eyes of the Shepherd. The Shepherd does not lift the sheep up, but holds His protecting hand over it. We have to persevere in our life's ascent to the very end. I have to make the final step alone.

Romano Guardini writes: "Lord, do not permit that You came the infinite way out of the abyss of Your unapproachability, through creation and sacred history, toward me, only one more step to reach me) and this final step will not happen. Because of Your love, do not let my life end before this happens."

I firmly believe that we Sisters are here in our Mother of Good Counsel Home to help each one of our residents to make this last step towards our loving Father in heaven. There are lots of good nursing homes, but we like to specialize in preparing the one, final, important step into eternal life.

I would like to end with the prayer of Blessed John Paul II:

"When the moment of our definite passage comes, grant that we may face it with serenity, without regret for what we shall leave behind. For in meeting You, after having sought You for so long, we shall find once more every authentic good which we have known here on earth, in the company of all who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith and hope.

Mary, Mother of pilgrim humanity, pray for us 'now and at the hour of our death.' Keep us ever close to Jesus, your beloved Son, and our Brother, the Lord of life and glory.

Amen!"