

OLD AGE: STAGES OF LIFE

By Fr. Bede Griffiths

I've been asked to speak about old age, and as I'm now 86, I think I'm qualified to speak about it. And I should say to begin with, that the last twenty years of my life have been probably the most creative and most enriching of all. And so, perhaps this will be an important message, because many people seem to think that old age is a falling away, a gradual breaking down, but as for me it's been a continual renewal.

I like to think of human existence in three stages: the first stage, called the stage of **adolescence**, is the gradual growth of physical maturity for the first twenty years and during that time the mind and the character are beginning to develop, sexual desires are awakening and the person comes to the border of maturity. The next twenty years, 20 - 40, are the stages of **psychological maturity**; the capacities which have been developing in adolescence come to flower, and normally the person marries, has a family, they take work, find a profession and they develop all their different powers for sport, for arts and poetry and all the different aspects of life.

Now most people think that is the end of life and the aim is to prolong that period as long as possible into the fifties or the sixties. And when that begins to decline, your faculties begin to decline, you can't do what you did before, you begin to think you're failing, and so old age is a gradual senescence, a gradual loss of power. And I want to suggest the opposite, that the third stage of life should normally begin in the forties. That 20 - 40 yrs. is an *intermediate* period, it's not final, and that the final period begins more or less in the forties so it's been prepared before when not merely the physical and psychological, but the **spiritual** powers begin to develop, and for many people today this dimension has been lost—that beyond the physical and psychological there's nothing to expect. But the spiritual is precisely the part which transcends the physical and psychological and opens us to the eternal, so as we enter into the third phase, we begin to discover the *transcendent* capacities in our nature—that we're capable of transcending the body and transcending the mind and discovering the deep source of all reality.

I like to think of the first millennium, 500 - 600 B.C., as a time in human history when humanity awoke fully to this dimension. It's been present before, from the beginning actually, it slowly emerges in the first stage and it begins to emerge properly in the second, but only in the third stage, which it dramatically reached in the first millennium, does it break through. So everybody should, in the forties, begin to break through to this third phase, where the spirit is open to the transcendent, the infinite, the eternal, the one reality, whatever name we like to give to it.

So old age should be the flowering of the whole personality, and in a deep sense, I think I could say, we're not fully human persons until we enter into the third phase, the phase of the spirit. And everything indicates that at that phase we go beyond space and time. The first stage, the physical, we're growing in

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space and developing the body; the second phase we're growing in time and developing the various faculties of the mind and so on; in the third stage, we're transcending space and time, discovering the whole order of eternity and infinity and the whole which embraces all these other parts and other elements in our lives.

So the real aim of life is to prepare for the third stage, for the awakening of the spirit, which can, mind you, that was present, mind you, in the very earliest stage and can flower at an earlier stage. Some people at a very young age awake to the spirit, others during the more mature period discover something of it, but for everybody I feel, the possibility is there of discovering it in the third stage. And that is where mystical experience begins, but not only mystical experience, but a whole way of seeing life, of seeing yourself, of seeing your whole existence in a new concept, in the light of a whole which embraces all your previous experience.

So that really opens up hope to people because many people seem to be hopeless, that in old age there's nothing more to expect except the gradual decline. But the shedding of the body which takes place at the end of the third stage, is simply the final stage; the body has grown and matured, it's come to it's fulfillment and now it's ready to go. And when the body is shed then the soul, the psyche, has a greater freedom, and is able to unite with the spirit in a more meaningful way, and the whole personality, the whole being finally passes and reaches it's fulfillment, not in this world of space and time, but in the eternal world which is the world of reality. So that's the hope of the future.