

**ENJOY OLD AGE**  
**Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

“Fr. Varghese, when are you retiring?” a friend, who came to greet me on my birthday on May 31st, asked.

“Instead of coming to Gujarat if I had remained in Kerala and if I had selected teaching profession like my brother and my eldest sister, my uncle and my aunt, then I would have been celebrating today a decade of my retired life. In Kerala the retiring age is 55 years. But today at 65, I am working full-time and some times over-time in my office. So I do not even think about retiring”, I said.

“The average life-span of an Indian today is little less than sixty-five years. I have completed 65 years. Now I have crossed the average life-span for an Indian. So whatever time I get now is like grace marks given to a student to get through an examination. Now whatever days or years I get, I consider them as God’s special grace to me,” I said to another friend who wanted to know my age on my birthday.

“Old age is the crown of life and it is also the last scene of our life,” said Shakespeare commenting on old age. But I consider old age like an ‘arangetram’. I found the word ‘arangetram’ in a Gujarati invitation card which I received. But I think that the word is not Gujarati but Malayalam. ‘Arangetram’ means the public exhibition of classical dance, which a student has been studying and practicing for several years.

If a person spends most of his life very busy doing a lot of things, then reaching a respectable senior age, may be compared to ‘arangetram’. So old age is an ‘arangetram’ of the dance of life, which a person has been doing all his life.

Usually ‘arangetram’ is performed at a young age. So, when I compare old age with ‘arangetram’ the old age disappears in my mind as old age and I experience the energy and restlessness of a youth. So I feel the restlessness and the impatience of a youth to pursue new goals and more achievements.

Today the salaried people retire at 55 years in Kerala and 58 to 60 or even 62 to 65 years in other states. But many people do not retire on account of their age. Perhaps, they may get away from the job, which they have done all their lives but now they look for new fields for engagement and thrive in them.

As an observer of human life, I see some people suddenly getting old within a week or a fortnight after their retirement from service. They do not know what to do with their lives. So there is no freshness on their face. There is no enthusiasm in their voice. On the contrary, they appear lonely, gloomy and dejected. They are like the snake charmer whose snake has just died, and has lost his only means of livelihood. They sit idle whole day as if they are just waiting for the arrival of ‘Yamdev’, the god of death.

But the life of many people retired from their service or business, are filled with activities and they are full of life. They are able to enjoy life and they do enjoy living their old age. They do not retire from life even when they have retired from their old job. They look for new ways of leading and enjoying their old age.

They look at the old age as a new opportunity to live a full life. It is an opportunity to pursue those goals and achievements, which they always wanted to do but could not do during their life of service or business. Old age is a time to make one's dream a reality. It is an opportunity to do pleasant and enjoyable things with a lot of leisure without being a slave to the timing of one's wristwatch or the wall clock of one's office.

In my youth I considered a person old at the age of 65. But at my 65 years I have discovered that adding years to one's life have nothing to do with old age. An attitude of mind makes the difference. It is true that after certain age the physical strength of a person begins to diminish with the years. He/she experiences certain limitations. Aging is a natural phenomenon. But with advancing age a person gains more and more valuable experiences. He/she becomes seasoned and mature. He/she looks at life in a new and true perspective.

Even though the physical strength diminishes with advancing age, the spiritual and mental powers need not diminish automatically. In fact, as age increases a person can develop his/her spiritual and mental powers. A friend of mine is pursuing doctoral studies at the age of 70 plus. People do ask my friend, "Sir, why do you pursue the doctorate studies at your advanced age?"

"I have been a student all my life even when I was doing business and making money. Now I believe in continuing my studies till I die," my friend says to his solicitous inquirers.

In old age we get opportunities to make progress in different areas of our lives. We can widen our knowledge by reading books and travelling to new destinations. With small and big services at home and outside home we can share our joy of serving with the people concerned. We can visit peoples in our neighborhood, who are confined to their homes, or the people in hospitals and in prisons and thus make life meaningful to us and to others. With selfless services offered to orphanages or voluntary agencies, we can share our joy of selfless service with many people.

We can do a lot with our good will even when our movements are restricted with old age. We can smile and appreciate the people who look after our needs. Accepting joyfully the pain and suffering, which may come on our way due to old age, we can share our joy and contentedness of life with people who are with us at home and with those who visit us. Even when we feel loneliness and abandonment, with our good will and prayer we can get in touch with ourselves and with deep inner life we can cherish others and bless them.

In old age we need to be sure of one thing that we need not be a slave to our old age. While welcoming our advancing age we can be master of our old age by enjoying all the benefits of advanced age. In this our attitude is very important. Let us keep our attitude always positive and creative. The English poet Robert Frost comes to our assistance here. Let us cultivate the attitude of poet Frost. He says,

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep.  
And miles to go before I sleep.

Without being overtaken by old age we specially need to keep another thing in mind. Some elders engage themselves in various activities much more than they were regularly doing during the time of their job or business. I think that it is not a good thing. People need rest in their everyday life. The elderly people need much more rest and relaxation than say, a middle aged person. A person, who is fully occupied in endless activities in the whole day, will not find time and leisure to think and engage in creative activities.

The book of Sirach in the Bible says, “A law student acquires wisdom during his leisure hours; free from business he is capable of becoming wise”. (38, 24)

In our days, thanks to the discoveries and achievements, the average life span is on the increase. So naturally the population of the elderly people is also on the increase. So I dedicate this article to the elderly people and I wish that their lives become more and more meaningful and happy. (contact the author: [ciss@satyam.net.in](mailto:ciss@satyam.net.in))