




Vocation and Older Persons: The Gift of Years

 National Office
for **Vocation**
Helping people hear God's call

Pope Francis cares about older persons. Not only does he share an experience of life with them, but he deeply believes in the contribution they make to our society in their more advanced years. Following his initiative, the National Office for Vocation of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales, hopes to understand better, how to encourage older persons in their journey of responding to the call of the Lord in their lives.

The National Office for Vocation recognises the importance of hearing the invitation of God to follow him more closely at every age of our lives. Vocation is God's gift to us - a gift that gives meaning and purpose to our lives, an invitation to collaboration with the Lord in his work of building up the Kingdom of God in this world.

This survey was processed with the kind collaboration of Eliza Ross and the St John of God religious charity.

Sr Elaine Penrice fsp
Director of the National Office for Vocation



What was the challenge?

“Older people, on a social level, should not be considered as a burden, but for what they really are, that is, a resource and a wealth. They are the memory of a people”

(Pope Francis, 2019)

With these words Pope Francis has emphasised the importance and value of older people, and the need to recognise the uniqueness of the contributions they make to our world. With this in mind, the National Office for Vocation produced a survey in order to: Understand how Catholics perceive their role in the Church and in society more broadly, as they age.

How was the challenge addressed?

The National Office for Vocation (NOV) devised and disseminated three versions of an online survey, to Catholic parishes (N = 25), Religious Communities (N = 31) and Catholics over 60 (N = 216) in England and Wales (one version of the survey was completed by each of the above groups). The survey asked respondents to comment on the roles of older people within the Church, and wider society.

Demographic information of respondents was collected and analysed, together with responses to open-ended and closed (for example, yes or no questions) survey questions. The open-ended survey questions produced qualitative data, and so these responses were analysed using Thematic Analysis. Thematic Analysis allows qualitative data to be grouped into themes to produce a thematic map (shown below), which shows how the themes are linked together.

Relationships

The theme of Relationships emphasised the value that respondents placed on their relationships, both with other humans and with God. When asked about how they give meaning and purpose to their life now, for many respondents the answer centred around “Faith, family & friends.” (R58)

Forty-five percent of respondents said they derived meaning or purpose in their life through some form of interaction with family and/or friends. This included “Spending time with family” (R65) and having “the opportunity to provide good advice to the next generation.” (R63) Developing or deepening relationships with others through sharing knowledge, experience or providing guidance often formed a key part of respondents’ perceptions of the role of Catholics as they age. Hence, mentoring was a secondary subtheme of Relationships.

Forty-one percent mentioned their faith and “Trying to develop a deeper relationship with Our Blessed Lord...” (R178) through prayer, mass attendance or other means.

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Loving Others

It was evident that many respondents viewed Loving Others as a demonstration of their faith and relationship with God. Demonstration of Love for Others was considered to be a key component of respondents’ roles and took the form of providing practical help and support, or treating others with empathy and compassion. Respondents felt that God was asking them to “live with kindness & consideration to others.” (R81) and to “share...faith in a practical way.” (R7) The theme of Loving Others is summarised perfectly in the following comment from a questionnaire respondent:

“Love is always the answer...the feeling that I can make a positive difference to those around me by practical and personal acts of love.”
(R156)

Ageing as a Part of Life

As with any experience in life, there are Challenges involved with ageing. Participants described challenges including feeling “invisible and redundant” (R22c) as loved ones are lost, and “Health issues” preventing “previous ways to help others.” (R12) However, some respondents had found ways to adapt and respond to these challenges, such as “to pray more as my physical ability to help lessens” (R217), and now saw this as a key part of their role:



“Age related ailments are creeping upon me and I hope that I can accept this as part of God’s plan” (R94)

In addition to these challenges, there was also a focus on the Quality of Life that respondents had. Being able to “Meet my friends and continue with my hobbies” (R50) and engage in life-long learning by “Using the internet to fill gaps of knowledge” (R154) or attending Church courses or discussions gave meaning, purpose and quality to respondents lives. Owing to the importance of relationships for giving meaning and purpose to respondents lives (described above), the positive influence of strong relationships upon quality of life should not be underestimated.

Viewing Ageing as a Part of Life, with its unique challenges and opportunities shaped respondents’ perceptions of their role within the Church and society. If individuals’ quality of life is outweighed by difficulties and challenges associated with ageing, it may be difficult to move away from the stereotype of “oh I’m too old to be useful’. Instead, it is important that individuals are encouraged to see that “Older people have plenty to contribute - and learn...” (R215)

Being Involved

For many, Being Involved in parish life had a positive influence on quality of life. Involvement could take the form of specific roles within the Church, including “Various roles from Baking cakes and fund-raising activities to formal roles like Sacristan...Readers..” (R10p). In the version of the survey completed by parishes, the roles which parishioners must frequently held were; Lay Minister, Administrator and Eucharistic Minister.

Alternatively, involvement could simply be through generally being “made to feel part of the parish family” (R127). This sense of Feeling Part of Something often came from being “Consulted from time to time” (R70) or through being “acknowledged and thanked for volunteering.” (R20) Merely being “recognised and greeted by name...” (R175) also promoted positive experiences of involvement in parish life.



Making an Impact

Finally, it was evident that a key aspect of respondents' perceptions of their role was the belief that they could make a positive impact on their Church or on wider Society as they age. This theme has parallels with the theme of viewing Ageing as a Part of life (discussed above). Respondents demonstrated a willingness to make a positive impact through volunteering within the Church or wider society, addressing injustices or getting involved in discussions about the running of their parish.

Giving meaning and purpose to life "Through...service to others" (R56) was a frequent survey response. Respondents placed great importance on "The ability to make a difference ... participating in the voluntary sector." (R199) "Doing voluntary work to help others" (R143) was an area in which many felt they could make an impact, either within the Church itself or society more generally.

Respondents felt it was part of their role to "combat inequality" (R34) through addressing a range of Church and societal issues, including "Mental health awareness raising and fighting my corner for women in ministry" (R207) and "...seeking ways to use my resources in a way that supports a fair and just society - fair wages, fair employment conditions, environmental awareness and responsibility..." (R156)

"Being able to have a voice in any matter that I choose to interest myself in" (R203) and having "Comments, suggestions are listened to and considered" (R178) was another key element of respondents' belief that they could have an impact, particularly on Church matters. Some respondents felt this was not the case in their parishes, and would like the Catholic Church "Perhaps take more notice of what we [the laity] have to say."



What was learnt?

Individuals' relationships with others are key to the way in which they perceive their role. A meaningful relationship with God helps to instil a sense of compassion and love for others, which draws them towards roles in the Church or society that help and serve other people. Where individuals have positive relationships with family or friends, they see their role as one of support, which has a positive influence on the lives of their own, and subsequent generations.

There is a general sense that as people age, they perceive their role as centring around the idea of continuation; continuing to be involved, continuing to make a positive impact upon Church and societal matters, and continuing to enjoy things that provide them with a quality of life. However, sometimes there are challenges, such as health issues or perceptions of ageing, which prevent people from being able to carry out their role as they would wish to. Work needs to be done on finding ways to address these challenges, so that everyone is able to develop roles that provide them with a sense of purpose and joy as they age.