

# Living a mission at the end of life

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*“Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace according to your word.” (Luke 2:29)*

For those who pray Compline, the above verse is a familiar one. It begins the *Nunc Dimittis*; aged Simeon’s prayer as he takes the Christ-child in his arms in the Temple. In St. Luke’s account, the elderly are all marked by their fidelity to the Covenant: Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon and Anna.

Such fidelity is no simple acknowledgement of a contract concluded long ago; rather, it expresses how God continues to be faithful in the present. Simeon had been promised that before his death, he would see the Anointed One. God who was faithful to him fulfills the promise and rewards Simeon’s covenant faithfulness.

## The Elderly Have Something Valuable to Teach Us

Our western culture remains preoccupied with youthfulness. There is a vast industry to stave off the effects of aging and persuade us that our value is linked to appearing younger than in fact we are.

Like many traditional cultures, peoples in Biblical times had a different understanding of aging. At Jesus’ presentation in the Temple, the elderly are reminders of God’s fidelity and honoured for their wisdom and grace. They are engaged in a great mission at the turning point of salvation history.

There are other people in the Gospel who no doubt have reached a certain age, and whom Jesus singles out: the widow of Nain whose son Jesus brings back to life; the woman with a hemorrhage who is healed by her touch of his garment; the poor widow who contributes all that she has to the Temple treasury.

As men of repute, I imagine that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were not young men, they who took the body of Jesus for burial. These women and men have an important place in the life and death of Jesus and as such have something valuable to teach us.

## Seeing through the Gift of Wisdom

In the *Nunc Dimittis*, Simeon calls Jesus “light for the Gentiles” and “glory for Israel”. For Christians and Jews alike, light is the most basic of divine images as well as God’s first creation in Genesis. In the New Testament, it is perhaps the most apt metaphor for Jesus himself, the “true light” in John’s prologue (1:9).

One of the realities associated with aging is often a loss of vision. Faced with the weakening of our capacity to see, “Christ as light” illuminates our hearts and minds to see beyond the merely physical. I think we need to recover a sense of how the elderly religious see through the gift of wisdom and how their mission includes sharing that gift with those who are younger. Their wisdom is a blessing for the Church and a key impetus for its mission.

### Faith Gives Way to Sight

At the end of this journey of faith, our merciful God draws elderly religious into the fullness of His life. Though perhaps marked by suffering, these final weeks are a moment of grace for themselves and for their communities. Strengthened by the prayers of their sisters and brothers and nourished spiritually for that final journey, they can depart in peace.

For the believer, faith gives way to sight. As we prepare for our own departure in peace, we pray that we too may see God, face to face.