

Stages of Life

Stages of Prayer

*A Lenten Journey
of
Self-Discovery
and
Spiritual Growth*

A journey into self as a journey toward God

My Spiritual Self and My Prayer Life

Forms of prayer which I currently use:

Identify (check off those used)	Quantify Daily / Weekly / Monthly / Occasionally	Qualify How good is it for me? (1 - 10, being best)
___ Sunday Mass	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Weekday Mass	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Reception of Communion	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Sacrament of Reconciliation	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Adoration Chapel	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Benediction	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Read Scripture	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Pray with Scripture	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Spiritual Reading (reflection)	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Religious Reading (informational)	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Spiritual Viewing (inspirational TV / video)	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Spiritual Listening (inspirational tapes / radio)	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Reciting prayers (memorized prayer)	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Singing Hymns	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Meal Grace	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Rosary	___ D / W / M / O	___

Identify (check off those used)	Quantify Daily / Weekly / Monthly / Occasionally	Qualify How good is it for me? (1 - 10, being best)
___ Way of the Cross	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Novenas	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Reading prayers (cards / books)	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Liturgy of the Hours	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Spontaneous Prayer	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ to the Father	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ to Jesus	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ to the Holy Spirit	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ to Mary / Saints	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Intercessory Prayer	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Visiting the Sick	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Directed Meditation	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Spontaneous Meditation	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Group Prayer	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Spiritual Direction	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Spiritual Friendships (sharing faith one-to-one)	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Retreats	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Contemplation	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Spiritual Union with God (trans-corporeal experiences)	___ D / W / M / O	___

Identify (check off those used)	Quantify Daily / Weekly / Monthly / Occasionally	Qualify How good is it for me? (1 - 10, being best)
___ Praying “in tongues”	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Using “sacramentals” (holy water, candles, incense, blessed oil)	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Postures of prayer:	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ kneeling	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ sitting	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ standing	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ prostration	___ D / W / M / O	___
___ Acts of Penance (self-denial / mortification)	___ D / W / M / O	___

Favorite forms of Prayer: (name at least five)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Prayers I’ve tried and discarded:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Prayers I’ve not tried but desire:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Prayers I've decided not to try:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Prayers I don't understand, so cannot judge beneficial / non-beneficial:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

My sense of spiritual depth: (1 - 10, being best)

As a worshiper	_____	In group prayer	_____
In private prayer	_____	In living prayer	_____

My sense of relationship with God: (1 - 10, being best)

Father	_____	Son	_____	Holy Spirit	_____
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My sense of relationship to Mary / Saints: (1 - 10, being best)

Mary	_____	Saints	_____
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My sense of relationship to the Catholic Church: (1 - 10, being best)

as Inspiration to Prayer	_____
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as Spiritual Guide	_____
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as Moral Compass	_____
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Six Stages of Psycho-Social Development

Developmental Psychology as a Method to Track / Identify
Personal Moral Growth and Spiritual Maturation

WARNING Grand generalizations are offered to identify the various stages presented here. There is no universal accuracy nor descriptive exclusivity to any of these stages. The years of life offered are approximations for the sake of general comparison and do not mean persons in these age ranges are in the particular stage described. Individuals are actually capable of existing in multiple stages at the same time.

Stage 1: Absolute Dependence Upon Others (birth to 2 years)

The new born, developing infant, in psychological terms, is pre-rational. It is a time of pure reaction to a new world filled with various stimuli. All the infant knows is “self.” For the infant mind, he is the center of the universe. Everything exists for his sake. There is no memory to speak of at this stage, but a simple collection of repeated experiences that begin to train the mind to remember. From the beginning of life, the infant experiences the fundamental needs of every human being: a need for love and a need for security.

Love is a “heart” based, (scholastic terminology: will), emotional experience which feeds the desire to have relationships with other beings. **Security** is a mind based, (scholastic terminology: intellect), more reflective, experience which is attained when one knows he/she is safe and has all necessary provisions. These needs are met differently in each stage of life. Security needs are addressed through psychological and mental development. Love needs are addressed through social and relational development.

The infant’s social world is little more than parents (or their equivalent). In the pre-rational mind of the infant, these persons, (parents or others), are the only source for the fulfillment of the needs of love and security. The infant feels hunger / thirst / discomfort, and calls out (cries). The parent is there to handle these security needs even if the infant does not understand how or why. He simply knows this is what he must do to gain an experience of safety and satisfaction. Or the infant senses being alone and calls out again. The parent enters the room, picks up the infant in his/her arms, and offers soothing words. The infant does not know how or why, but he experiences connection to this person and feels loved.

Morally speaking, though pre-rational, the infant is discovering the principle of cause and effect, or action-reaction. “I cry” (action), thus “I receive” (reaction). Also, “I do this,” and parents show positive reactions that affirm this as “good” behavior; my experience of comfort and love increase. Or, “I do that,” and parents show negative reactions that reinforce this as unacceptable behavior – it increases the experience of discomfort and aloneness. Without knowing the concepts of right and wrong, the infant is learning *good* and *bad* based on the reactions he experiences. This is moral training without reflection or understanding.

Stage 2: More to Life Than “Me”

(2 years to 5)

For the young child, the mind begins to catalogue experiences; the power of *memory* is developing. Because of associated action-reaction memories, also the rational or reflective mind develops. Personal choices begin to be made in order to enhance personal pleasure. The child develops a collection of “likes” and “dislikes.” Things which contribute to his pleasure and comfort, regardless of their intrinsic value become judged as good while things that create disappointment become judged as bad. These become the human emotional responses to the experiences of life. The child is happy and secure when everything happens the way he wants.

The social environment of the child has grown beyond parents and family to include the neighborhood, or even pre-school. Now the child sees that there are other people who are similar and those who are different. Because the young child is still trying to please those in charge of his world so that he receives positive responses and the things he wants, (love), he begins to adopt the social responses (bias/prejudices) of the significant adults in his life. It is unthinking to a degree but becomes part of the set of values he will use for some time to come.

Also at this time, the child discovers that his behavior does not control his parents quite so absolutely. He can do everything “right” but may still receive “no” as an answer to his requests to have his wants and needs met. If parents are successful in teaching deferred gratification, the child will integrate some of the negatives of life into a fuller picture. Disappointment is not totally bad because sometimes the needs of others supercede his own. Or the child may simply continue to fight against the “no” responses because parents have been inconsistent in setting rules and offering affirmation.

On the moral level, the child develops a rudimentary awareness of rules. To be in relationship with others beyond the family means that most people, especially peers, have to follow many of the same rules. Obeying the rules is part of doing good things which bring about positive responses from those in charge. When the child lives up to the expectations of parents or other adults, he receives positive “rewards.” However, failing to obey those rules and expectations create negative responses or “punishment.” The child is barely rational enough to understand the difference, so he is still very reactive and will simply choose what produces the best results for himself. As well, cooperation with peers gains positive responses as much as regular good behavior gains desired rewards.

Because the child begins to see that rules exist beyond or above the authority of his parents alone, he begins to realize that there must be a source of authority above parents who created these rules or fixed certain patterns to life. In religious homes, the child is introduced to God as the supreme authority even over parents. Therefore, God becomes the ultimate source of security and reward for being “good.”

Stage 3: Socialization and Belonging

(5 years to 12)

By school age, the child has experienced quite a bit of life, and his mind is busy trying to make sense of it all. With each new experience, he reflects and reasons to how this experience matches prior experiences which were valued as either good or bad. Because the world and life are changing so fast, daily experiences of insecurity are all too common. These tests of his fixed value perspectives create an ongoing struggle to maintain some sense of mental comfort and security. Those who are assisted in facing these tests and in making sense of life continue to develop their ability to reason and find comfort in a changing world. Those who are not guided through the development of reflective knowledge can feel lost; they retreat into basic activities which provide comfort – most commonly oral or audio-visual stimulants, i.e., thumb sucking, eating, or T.V., computers – as a means to avoid or escape the confusion and discomfort. All children begin to find comfort in the familiar and begin to set up an environment that protects and provides security.

With entrance into the grander world of school and society, the child discovers that his behavior, i.e., his choices, help him to fit in and belong. This enhances security, but it also teaches the message that love is experienced as being welcomed into the group. When he experiences that he fits in or belongs, his emotional need for love in relationship is met. It is also now that the child learns the harsh lesson of being rejected or *not* belonging. Similarities and differences which began to show themselves in the prior stage, now become the dynamic of group selection. Peer pressure becomes a real factor in the child's life, which can lead to decisions contrary to his training but which creates the greater comfort of being part of the group. Friendships sometimes become more important than family. Family is seen to be the source of expectations and criticism in times of failure. But peers, who are also seeking the same sense of belonging, tend to be less critical of each others shortcomings because they, too, do not want to be excluded. Bonds develop based on mutual acceptance and support. In the harsh world, groups are essential to survival.

The social setting of the classroom as well as organized groups teach the child the moral lesson that rules exist to create order. Order, which is regularized behavior, provides security. Things are done certain ways all the time, and this gives a generalized experience of peace in life. Because this is positive, the child learns to *conform* to the rules he is given. He is moving from the mere understanding of good and bad through positive or negative reactions to a sense of right and wrong because of what helps maintain order or what contributes to chaos. For example, it is not only good to pay attention in class but also right because the order allows the achievement of the class goal of education. It is not only bad to disrupt the class but also wrong because the lack of order defeats the purpose of the class.

Similarly, the children in their social groups develop their own rules to keep the order of the group. They can become somewhat dogmatic about their rules as well because the group is so essential to their perceived well-being. Yet, once the group is established and working, children learn another valuable lesson from these young social groups – compromise. Because all members have the freedom to propose rules or amendments to the rules, not everyone will like each suggestion. Keeping the group together may be the impetus to practice compromise, where the child learns that even though he does not get everything the way he wants, there is enough of a reward to make the acceptance of displeasure worthwhile.

Stage 4: Search for Identity and Independence

(12 years to 20)

Puberty affects the mind just as much as it affects the body. Because of all the new hormones and natural chemicals added to the body, the teenager really does begin to think and react differently. The experience of daily life is turned head for heel because all the ideas of the previous decade no longer seem to work or even matter. Because of the teenager's sense of being an "adult," the old systems and categories he developed are not so stable anymore. Those ideas served a purpose while he was only a child, but it is a new world now with all sorts of new possibilities because the teenager experiences "power" from within. Rapid changes make the teen emotionally unstable, which can heighten insecurity. Peer bonds help the teen get through this stage because they are going through the same changes.

The emotional drive is to be in charge of one's own life. The belief is that this new-found internal experience of personal power, with its adult emotions, will become his new source of security. He should be able to provide for himself since he now has the same power his parents and other adults possess. Thus, the teen finds himself in conflict with the world, and in particular with the adults in his life. Parents and teachers appear to disregard his adulthood because they still act in ways that try to control him. The teen no longer understands the love of parents and other adults that tries to protect. Because of the power struggle, in the teen's mind, it is all about control. Because he has just gotten this gift of power, he does not want to give it up, nor will he give it up lightly.

The teen still has a desire to fit in and belong to his social groupings for the sake of the security and love they provide. However, the new experiences of adult abilities challenge the teen from within to seek a unique identity and to be accepted as unique. Because of the variations that occur at this time of development, teenage groupings become more refined and smaller in numbers. This allows for space to be individuals without the increased potential for conflict. Smaller groupings allow the bonds to be strengthened. Some of these bonds will actually last for life because they are so much a part of developing identity. At the same time, experience teaches the teen that love is fleeting. There are temporary loves as well as lasting loves. Emotional changes happen at different rates for different people, and the teen is better at bonding with those who develop at a similar pace. Because of sexual development, there grows a desire to bond with members of the opposite sex for the sake of fulfilling the natural drives of life.

Competition becomes a real part of life because this is one way to prove an individual's power and uniqueness; it is also a way to be noticed by peers and members of the opposite sex. The desire to be "on top" is part of moving into the adult world. The amount of recognition and support offered by superiors helps to move the teen forward in this journey of life.

In the area of morality, the drive of "adulthood" power and the desire for freedom and independence lead teenagers to be critical of the rules and regulations which have governed their lives thus far. Testing the controlling strength of authority is natural. Because the teen has some power now, questioning the old rules is a way to make sure they still apply. Making his own rules expands from the pre-pubescent experiences, and only convinces him that rules can be changed or broken. Only those rules with clear consequences are taken seriously. The absence of rules

increases the experience of insecurity. So even though the teen may claim to want freedom over rules, subconsciously he needs the rules and wants them to exist. Rules give the teen a sense of protection in a world of rapid change. If the teen can manufacture his own rules, and these blend well with those that must continue to exist, this will enhance his sense of personal identity.

Stage 5: Self-Determination (Autonomy) and Generativity (20 years to 65)

Those who successfully move through the trials of their teenage years achieve the independence and a level of self-identity they were seeking. Yet, as a *mature* adult, the individual realizes that the process of maturing and attaining this independence is never complete. Learning that life is a mixture of success and failure leads to a balance of security-insecurity. The mature person deals with this on a daily basis. Flux is a part of life and absolute control of one's own life is no longer expected. Even if a person reaches the age of adulthood, if he has not learned this lesson of flux and imperfect control, he has not really achieved adulthood but continues to labor under the adolescent concept that he will one day fully control his own life. Thus, the absence of peace and security continue to plague such an individual. For the mature adult, the integration of personal power into one's self-identity also leads to the desire to be creative, to produce something which displays this power and identity tangibly.

The adult social setting is composed of friendships and work relations, still seen in terms of groupings, and particular relationships which provide the love needed to feel significant to others. Often the exclusive relationship of marriage is chosen to satisfy the need for love on a permanent basis. Yet, if the decision to marry is made before a person is fully developed or settled, the demanding relationship and expectation of mutual love may lead to failure. Then, the person often reverts to earlier stages of social activities for love and support. A common goal of marriage, in order to display a person's creative power, is to conceive and raise children. This event in life gives the individual a completely new experience of love and relationship. Children can prove the adult has truly matured and developed the ability to surrender control of life. Or they can lead one to discover the need to further develop as a self-giving person who serves rather than be served.

In the area of moral development, the adult has come to understand that the rules of life, which used to be imposed from outside the self, must now be embraced as personal values and norms. These personally adopted principles of life and relationship to God and others become an integral part of the person's self-identity and enhances the sense of personal security in life. It also creates a basis for true self-love because he has made himself into an integrated, self-motivated productive member of society. No one needs to tell him what to do; he has learned for himself what is right or wrong, good or bad. He performs appropriate actions because these choices are essential to his peace of mind. The adult understands the benefit of living by the rules: life has order and direction. Thus, though the adult can claim to be autonomous because he lives by his own choices, there is also a sense of obedience to those who have authority over him, not merely to avoid punishment, nor for any desired reward, but because he would not be true to himself if he were to do anything less. The adult is even willing to see himself as a model for the children over whom he has influence so that they can reach the same self-confidence and peace he has achieved.

Stage 6: Post-Generative and Re-Dependence

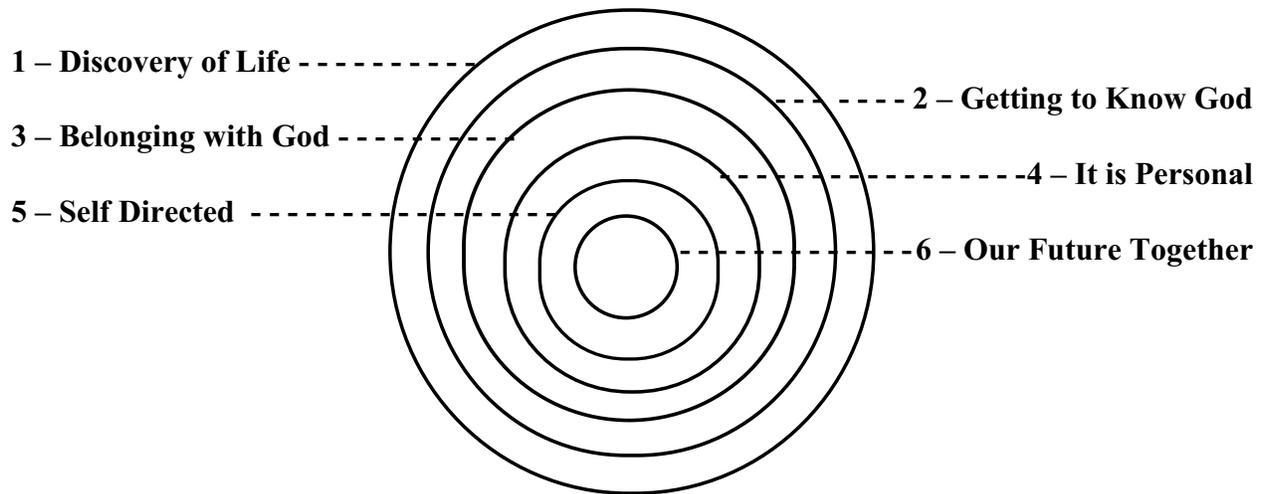
(65 years to)

The aging adult realizes that the major portion of life is past, so questions begin to surface about his ultimate future. When a person has struggled with self-doubt, that translates into insecurity for his future. Even without this kind of doubt, one begins to wonder about the value of one's life and accomplishments. There may be regrets for poor choices or missed opportunities. The elderly seek and need affirmation about their history and their future in order that they can experience security and maintain an integrated sense of life, especially as personal powers and control begin to wane. A desire to connect to a future beyond this world grows stronger with the passing of time. Also, an awareness that there is more to life than living for the moment becomes more and more real in the older person's mind. Because life begins to be judged as a whole, "Who I am" is more important than "What I do." Security is found in knowing that one has lived a good life and is headed in the right direction as far as the future life is concerned.

As peers become fewer and fewer, love once more is experienced as fleeting, not on purpose but simply by the circumstances of life. So the love relationships which do exist become more and more precious. Trying to experience social integration with a younger generation is particularly difficult unless those around the older person show respect and admiration for who he is. The experience of being berated by younger people because of age-imposed limitations can create extreme experiences of rejection and loneliness which tend to create greater isolation. Because, in his estimation, no one seems to understand the elderly person, there is a natural tendency in his mind and even in his behavior to continue to "associate," through imagination, with lost peers. They are the familiar love relationships of a life which is now moving in their direction.

The older person has long controlled himself in obedience to the principles and rules of life. He continues to do so because it is a part of his identity. However, emotions and reactions begin to exert their power again, and the individual can find himself acting out negative emotions he once thought he could control. The reality is that as the body weakens, so too does mental control. It is not that there is a choice to give up on the guiding principles of life but that reactions become faster than reason. In consolation, the intention to be good and do good has not changed. Therefore, these are more accidental reactions rather than intentions to harm others in word or action. The individual can trust that he has not lost his moral life and integrity.

The Journey into Self and the Discovery of God



Stage 1: Discovery of Life

(birth to 2 years)

Spirituality, which is a sense of the reality of life beyond mere corporeal existence, does not really exist in the pre-rational mind of the infant. There is too much to discover about the immediate world around him. Also, memory and associative thinking are yet to develop. As Catholics we believe that the soul exists from conception, and once baptized into the Body of Christ (the Church), these little saints are in perfect relationship with God, even if it is beyond human expression. In some ways their spirituality is higher than all others because they are free from the ability to sin. Too bad we do not remember that time of life!

Again, because of being pre-rational, it is impossible for the infant to know God as God. The infant knows parents as the sole and ultimate providers of love and security. At this stage parents are effectively God for the infant. Vestiges of this concept (parents = God) continue to exist all through life. Even when older children learn parents are fallible and as adults can forgive this in their parents, parents can still exert some reverential power over grown children.

Without the ability to reason, at best a very young child can mimic the visible actions of others, often in a mirror-like fashion. It can be a game for them, trying to get them to make the sign of the cross, etc. Prayer, which is a way of expressing and experiencing a relationship with God, is pointless at this stage because there is no ability to form thoughts for expression. It is also superfluous because without the ability to sin, the relationship with God is perfect, just unknown on the limited level of being human.

Stage 2: Getting to Know God

(2 years to 5)

Because the concepts of God and prayer are introduced to the child at this stage, the door is open to developing a spirituality. Yet, honestly, because the world is still one of discovery, a true spirituality is not likely no matter how *profound* “truths from the mouths of babes” may be. Because imagination is developing, concepts like heaven, hell, God, devil, angels, etc. can be vividly embraced. But so too, Santa Clause, the Easter Bunny, Tooth Fairy, goblins, witches, ghosts, etc. are just as likely real to the young child. It does take imagination to develop spirituality because we are talking about transcendence, so imagination should be encouraged with reasonable delineation.

The young child will avidly copy the parental description of God because the child wants parents to be happy with him. (Remember, parents are still the prime source of pleasant and unpleasant experiences.) So, the child will say and do whatever the parents/adults in charge recommend and expect. But there is still no truly personal relationship with God because the tangible world is still all that is real and understandable. Bible stories have the same value as other stories to the child. The child will copy the expressions of reverence for things divine he senses his parents hold. Not surprisingly, Santa Clause and the Easter Bunny are more “real” at this stage because in the mind of the child there is actual evidence of them.

Teaching children to memorize prayers is definitely possible at this stage. However, most children will only pray when told to do so, and again, in imitation of the adult praying with them. Keeping prayer simple is best at this stage. Also keeping prayers within their attention span is appropriate. Because children know the concept of personal needs and should be learning the trait of gratitude, prayers of petition and thanksgiving are good places to start at this level. Young children will rarely initiate their own personal prayer at this stage.

Stage 3: Belonging with God

(5 years to 12)

Because school age children are learning right from wrong and good from bad, and because they clearly understand cause and effect, they begin to want positive results from their spiritual experiences as well. So a personal “spirituality of need” develops: what serves the child’s purpose is adopted; what makes no sense is left aside. As rules are learned, and as reward and punishment are experienced, the spiritual experience of sin and forgiveness is introduced. Depending on how adult leaders use these concepts, the child will integrate them into his vision of spiritual reality or struggle against sin and forgiveness as experiences of displeasure.

Conceptual aptitude develops at this stage, so if the child’s curiosity is encouraged, he will seek more and more understanding of the transcendent reality of life and ask probing questions. Reasonable answers assist the developing spiritual side of life. It is not too early to start the child learning about the lives of the saints as a way to develop his own spirituality or find answers to the questions of life. This is also the time to help the child begin to consider his direction in life. God’s call, his vocation, to marriage or religious life can begin to be visualized at this stage. Dialogue with adults about these deeper issues is valuable and appropriate at this time in life.

On the reverse side, because of all the questions which float into the child’s mind, if there

is a failure to find adequate answers, the young person can be turned off to the possibility of a *personal* spirituality. So spirituality remains something “theoretical” and neither real nor necessary. Such negativity can be corrected later in life, but only if the individual experiences a personal need to reinvestigate the curiosities of youth.

God is still more imagination or image-oriented rather than fully real. Yet, the young child can better tolerate an unseen God because he discovers that other people can exist without being seen. As well, not everything can be explained fully. Because of the growing importance of friendships, the child can imagine a friendship with God. This friendship is likely to be dependent upon how the child fulfills his obligations to God based on his behavior. Conforming to God’s expectations, as with regular human relations, will keep the friendship going. It can be noted that because Jesus, Mary, and the saints are persons the child can be “shown,” they are more real than the God the child cannot see, so they are more easily experienced as friends. Remember, the child wants to be connected and belong. Doing good by imitating Jesus will give the child a sense of belonging to God.

Memorized prayers and those written/readable are the chief substance of prayer at this stage. These prayers do not even need to be understandable because there is more of a need to copy the adults for the sake of approval. The individual child’s “neediness” will dictate the preferred kinds of prayer. Also, because creativity is developing, experimenting with personally composed prayers should be encouraged. The capacity to think reflectively exists, so limited types of meditation can actually be introduced at this stage. Getting the child to reflect and imagine him/herself living in the Bible stories or with the saints is possible. Yet the child should be reassured that it will be more his or her own thinking and imagination for the most part at this stage. Errors in these reflections are likely, and they should be corrected but not criticized or the child chastised because of mistaken thoughts.

Stage 4: It is Personal

(12 years to 20)

Based on the spirituality he has learned prior to this stage, the teenager will either continue on the same line of development, or begin to search and experiment on his own. He may even challenge family traditions because of the drive to be unique and make every choice a *personal* one. However, there is a deep-seated, if sometimes unrecognized, need for a spiritual side of life. It must be personally supportive of what the teen is experiencing as turmoil and new ways of seeing everything in life. So other, even non-Christian, forms of spirituality might be explored. Whatever helps the teen on his personal path through life is what he will choose. Some will go to great lengths to investigate and develop their spirituality. Others who find comfort in superficial living will not even bother.

If the young person’s vision of God was positive and friendly, this will likely continue as well for the teenager. However, if God is linked to parental/institutional authority and control, the teen will likely reject this God image, or at least fight against it. The mind and imagination are very active now and accommodation begins to take place: the person accepts and rejects facets of God until a likeable image develops. How close to reality this may be is dependent on all the other factors of life and whether the teen has done serious investigation of his religion and personal faith.

Prayer must also be a matter of personal choice. The teen may conform in externals to parental expectations of going to church and the like, but interior prayer will be limited to what he really likes or wants and what responds to his needs. What does not touch his heart will not be appreciated or used. As the teen encounters other spiritualities, he may try their prayer styles, e.g., Zen meditation. An “on-track” Christian teen (not to be read as a rejection of those who explore other ways of prayer) will like reading Scripture for himself to discover what it says for him. He will like non-standard or non-traditional forms of prayer just for the sake of being unique and contrary. Prayer which expresses his individuality or challenges the standards of the prior generation will be the most attractive.

Stage 5: Self Directed

(20 years to 65)

The mature adult recognizes the value of the spiritual traditions of the Church and wants to be in line with those as a foundation for his own spirituality. Yet he has learned the benefit of being an individual and having spirituality as a part of his identity. He sees himself as a blending of body, mind, and soul. Keeping these aspects of self in harmony gives him the greatest sense of control and direction even as he admits there is always room for growth and improvement. Even those who earlier rejected the spiritual side of life at this stage tend to rediscover its value and seek it out to have a sense of harmony in life. Personal responsibility to be spiritual is recognized as part of maturity, so development is owed to one’s self and not because others tell him to develop this side of life or to display it.

All the images and imagined aspects of God that were proposed and tried/tested in the earlier stages of life give way to the desire to know the real God. As the adult must be real to self and to others, so too must God be real. Because we believe in the Trinity, the adult wants a relationship with all three persons. As well, there must be a balanced relationship with Mary and the saints. Overemphasis on the magical or superstitious elements of belief are seen as childish, so they must be corrected to make the supernatural just another part of the full picture of life.

The adult, comfortable with himself, will recognize the fluctuations of life and the fluctuations of prayer. Rote prayers are just as good as spontaneous depending on the circumstances. The capacity to listen and experience God in meditation and contemplation is acceptable, not as imagination but as a real connection of the material world to the transcendent. The adult will accept the “duty” of prayer even when the personal desire may be weak because fulfilling duty is part of being autonomous yet in a committed relationship.

Stage 6: Our Future Together

(65 years to)

The need for a real spiritual life is strongest when a person realizes time on earth is becoming shorter. As he evaluates his history of choices and relationships, the older adult will want to be sure any past sins or mistakes are forgiven and healed so the future is more secure. This introspection is normal but may require spiritual direction and assistance if high levels of guilt or regret cripple an ongoing sense of self-worth and self-acceptance. To feel safe and secure, the older person is more ready to abandon himself to God’s will and control, just so he is doing everything right. Therefore, a return to dependence on God is normal.

God must be as real as possible and as personal as possible. God may be the only friend some elderly have left, and they will want that familiarity with Him for the sake of a secure future. Elderly commonly want to know, “what does God think of me?” Reassurance that God is a God of love and mercy who accepts us as we are is essential to peace of mind. The more the relationship with God is personal, the more ready the person will be to meet God face to face.

Keep it traditional and keep it simple are the primary needs for prayer in the elderly. What has been a standard part of life thus far needs to be maintained so the aged adult senses balance and security. Change to the words or the forms of prayer is extremely difficult. There is no longer a need to explore new forms because the spiritual reality that God takes the simplest word as a sign of real connection and commitment is the abiding truth. Any connection is enough for God to work in the lives of His children, no matter their age.