

The Wisdom of Old Age

*by a young Catholic doctor
who attends the traditional Mass offered by priests of
the Fraternity of St Peter*

*So he called his twelve disciples to him, and gave them authority to cast out unclean spirits, and to **heal every kind of disease and infirmity.** (Matthew 10.1 tr. Knox)*

The Catholic Medical Association



*Supporting Catholics in healthcare
through prayer, friendship and Catholic catechesis*

The Wisdom of Old Age

On 15 July 2017 I had the great privilege of revisiting St Peter's, Vauxhall in central London in my capacity as a member of the Catholic Medical Association.

The Catholic Medical Association was founded in 1911 as the Guild of Ss Cosmas and Damian, and later became the Guild of Catholic Doctors. As healthcare has changed, so has this organization. A few years ago, the Guild chose to accept as members all Catholics in healthcare and thus became the Catholic Medical Association (CMA). This is in my view a very good thing, as the CMA not only has a voice representing all Catholics in healthcare, but is made up of Catholics in all branches of healthcare, who are thus able to bring a range of skills to the organization. The CMA is enjoying a renewal at the moment (more on this later).

This was my third visit to St Peter's and each time I have left feeling refreshed and rejuvenated. St Peter's is a residence for older people run by the Little Sisters of the Poor. Pope Benedict visited St Peter's in 2010 on his visit to the UK.

As a young doctor working in the NHS, it is very easy to burn out and lose enthusiasm for the job, which for me is something of a vocation. Visiting St Peter's puts the vocation back into medicine though!

It is a very beautiful thing to see the sisters and staff interact with the residents. When you drive through the big black automatic gates into St Peter's a most curious and profound thing happens: time 'slows down'! Although the clock still ticks at the same rate, there isn't the rush that there is out there in the world beyond the gates. Indeed geographically St Peter's is a little oasis amongst the rather poor neighbourhood of Vauxhall, which is somewhat built up with a lot of busy roads. When the huge gates open you enter a tranquil space with pretty flower beds and statues of St Peter and St Joseph.

Perhaps in the twilight of one's life, as one's body and sometimes mind slow down, time does too? Out there in the world, there seems to be such a great rush: somewhere to go, something to do, meetings, appointments, deadlines...

For me, I am glued to email and txt-updates on my phone and trying to squeeze as many commitments into the day as possible. When I step into St Peter's, time stands still for a little while. I forget my phone in my pocket and looking at who has sent me messages. I become present in the 'now'.

After attending the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in the chapel, (which is where our Holy Father Emeritus gifted the sisters and residents a very fine mosaic of St Peter) I met a lovely lady resident in a wheel chair with a warm glowing smile. I greeted her and shook her hand. She held on to my hand and although her mouth moved the words didn't come out. She continued to struggle to

vocalise her words. Instead of being rushed, we all stood round and waited for her. Eventually she gave up, and smiled a rather resigned smile. Sr Marie Therese then told us about the lady's life and about her brother who had lived in St Peter's, Vauxhall as well. She listened and seemed to enjoy it, still holding onto my hand. She seemed a very peaceful lady, and the member of staff pushing the wheelchair did not mind having to wait.



Little Sisters of the Poor: Sr Jacinta and Sr Vincente photographed with the mosaic of St Peter gifted by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010 on his visit to England

Perhaps this calmness in St Peter's, this phenomenon of not rushing, this slowing down of time has something to do with it being a house run by religious sisters? In his rule on the monastic life, St Benedict devoted a whole chapter to taciturnity which is not so much silence itself as the spirit of silence. I think this has something to do with there not being the frenetic need to fill silence with words, but to enjoy the moment. The Little Sisters, although not Benedictine, do have a lot of time during the day for communal prayer.

For the lady in her wheelchair, who wanted to speak but eventually with a resigned smile gave up, it reminded me of Pope John Paul II in his last days when having been wheeled to the window overlooking crowds of praying pilgrims, wanted to speak but was unable. With great difficulty he raised his arm before being wheeled back in. This silence, though not chosen, but imposed by illness, he bore bravely and is raised to the altars partly because of this courageous witness at the end of his life. So too, through this resigned smile this lady bore her cross bravely and patiently.

As a young doctor, I will regrettably probably see the legalization of euthanasia in the UK within my lifetime. Pope John Paul II bore witness to the inherent value of human life, through his preaching and papal documents and then latterly as illness and old age crept up, through his example.

I remember some years ago watching on the television Pope Benedict's visit to St Peter's, Vauxhall when he visited England. He greeted residents, some of whom were perhaps younger than him! In his address to the staff and residents he said: "Every generation can learn from the experience and wisdom of the generation that preceded it. Indeed, the provision of care for the elderly should be considered not so much an act of generosity as the repayment of a debt of gratitude". Oh! How profound are these words!

So what is this wisdom and experience which can be learnt from the older people?

1) Sr Marie Therese gave me a copy of the summer edition of *Safe Home* (the quarterly magazine of the Little Sisters of the Poor) in which there are many interesting stories and articles. In the first part, residents of the various Little Sisters' homes were asked to choose one item they owned which held a special significance to them. They were then photographed with this item and asked to explain why it was special. All of the older people had chosen interesting items ranging from teddy bears to rosary beads, which were special to them, however I wish to focus on two residents and the objects they chose. On page 4, a resident at the Little Sisters' home in Jersey is photographed sitting down holding a small black and white photograph which has been framed. His reason for choosing this item? It is of his parents "to whom I owe the gift of life and the love of Jesus in the Faith". What a wonderful tribute to his parents! Then on page 13 another resident is photographed humbly looking up at a large statue of the Sacred Heart. This statue she explains was gifted to her grandfather who had a great devotion to the Sacred Heart. "From childhood my brother, Hugh, and I have loved and honoured this statue which we have now in our present home with the Little Sisters of the Poor, Manchester."

So: what wisdom can I glean from these testimonies? I think it is this: both of these older people actually have the same testimony. After long lives in which they have owned or could have owned cars, jewellery, clothes, the latest gizmos... what do they value the most? Their Faith. In fact they value the gift of Faith so much they chose an item which represented their gratitude to the previous generation which handed on that Faith to them.

These are two people whose message is the message of the Christian throughout the centuries: one of sacrifice for love of Christ, and gratitude for the many blessings received through life. The greatest item they own is the Faith, and it is worth sacrificing all worldly goods for that. So I am left wondering: do I show enough gratitude to my own parents, family and community for passing on the gift of Faith to me? Probably not! If I had to choose one item, would it be my smartphone, or would I choose the Cross?

2) That lady's smile - she struggled to get her words out but instead of being frustrated and angry she showed us a beautiful, gentle smile. It is an expression I can visualise as I am writing

this. Sometimes the most difficult thing can be to smile. And so I ask myself: Do I accept the Cross with joy? Do I bring a smile into the world in spite of hardships and suffering?

There is a lot to reflect on when I think about my visit to St Peter's. So much so, I would say visiting St Peter's is like having a little retreat: it allows me time to reflect, recover, and redirect my efforts in my attempt to be a good Catholic doctor.

So why were some young healthcare professionals including myself at the Little Sisters of the Poor in Vauxhall?

On 4th November 2017, the Catholic Medical Association is holding its second annual youth conference for juniors and students of the healthcare professions (medical students, nursing students etc). It is entitled *Catholics in Healthcare: Extraordinary Lives, Extraordinary Saints*. Last year we held our first conference at which 70 young Catholics in healthcare were present. This year it is a great joy for us that the Little Sisters of the Poor will be giving a presentation about their good work!

My hope and prayer is that my fellow young Catholics in healthcare will be inspired by the Little Sisters, and the healthcare which is provided at the Little Sisters' homes. Furthermore I hope that we will take on board the Holy Father Emeritus's words and value older people, particularly through learning from "the experience and wisdom of the generation that preceded" us.

CATHOLICS IN HEALTHCARE:
EXTRAORDINARY LIVES, EXTRAORDINARY SAINTS



DR SWEE ANG OPERATING WITHOUT GLOVES,
ANAESTHETIC OR ELECTRICITY - SHATILA
REFUGEE CAMP 1982

CATHOLICS IN HEALTHCARE: EXTRAORDINARY LIVES, EXTRAORDINARY SAINTS

A ONE DAY CONFERENCE FOR JUNIORS
AND STUDENTS OF THE HEALTHCARE
PROFESSIONS

(DOCTORS, NURSES, MIDWIVES, PHARMACISTS,
MEDICAL STUDENTS, NURSING STUDENTS ETC)

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