

I give you Fr. Ron Rolheiser. This time, he writes about his reflections on "Turning Sixty." In this modern age, it is said that "life now begins at 60."

(Editor's Note: This topic of our columnist Governor Sanchez is very timely in view of Bobby Reyes' new article, "Filipinos Appear to Suffer More from Amnesia and Alzheimer Pandemic Diseases.")

QUOTE.

Turning Sixty

Ron Rolheiser

Well, I've beaten the odds. When I was 27-years old, I attended a symposium on death and dying. One of the things we did was fill out a long questionnaire which was then run through a computer and the result told you when, statistically, you should expect to die. A computer told me that I would die at age 59.

That was based upon a number of things: My dad died at 62, my mum died in her mid-fifties, I'm a priest and celibate (a shorter life-projection than for married men), and I'm in a high-stress occupation. The statistical projection was that I would die before the age of 60. But, I had my 60th birthday yesterday and arrived there with enough energy to raise a toast to the future. I've beaten the odds!

But it gave me cause for reflection. What to say on your 60th birthday?

A couple of years before he died, the novelist, Morris West, wrote a remarkable autobiographical piece he called, *A View from the Ridge*. I like what he says in the preface of that book: Once you reach a certain age, he suggests, there should be only one phrase left in your vocabulary: Thank-you! With every birthday, gratitude should deepen until it colors every aspect of life. I'm not sure that I'm there, but at least I know where I should be going.

Reading Morris West's autobiography, reminded me of a conversation I had with the Irish theologian, Pat Collins, on a train in New Jersey a couple of summers ago. Heading for the same conference, we found ourselves sharing a seat on a train and Pat, robust in health, made this observation: "I love living and I hope still to live for a long time, but if I died today it would be okay. I'd be okay – because I'm loved. I know people who love me, and that's enough." That's a wonderful realization. Yesterday was my 60th-birthday and, like Pat Collins, I'd still like to live for a long time, but if I died tomorrow, I'd be okay, because I too know people who love me. I didn't always feel that way, about dying, or about being loved, when I was younger.

And what have I learned over sixty years?

Luck has been with me and, among other things, I have been given the opportunity to study under some first-rate scholars and mentors who occasionally were also saints. Literature, both secular and sacred, as well has been a rich well from which I have been able to drink and thirty-five years of priesthood and ministry have too, at least I hope, taught me some of life's real lessons.

So what have I learned?

First, that there is a God, though not everything we do in his name honors that. Bertrand Russell, in a famous debate with Frederick Copleston, once stated: "If the universe makes sense, then there is a God!" The universe does make sense, though not always on the surface of things. But deep down things make sense, especially morally, and we know that whenever we don't lie to ourselves. There's a law of karma, operative at every level of things that lets us know that the air we breathe out is the air that we will re-inhale. There is an ultimate justice in everything.

Second, the mystery of God, the universe, and human life are far, far bigger than we have ever imagined and can ever imagine. The older we get, the more we know how little we understand, how far beyond us is the great mystery, and how we need, as John of the Cross says, "to begin to understand more by not understanding than by understanding." When we are little children and we ask our mothers where the sun goes at night, the best answer they can give is that it goes down behind the trees to take a rest. Later we learn about stars and planets and the big-bang theory and we graph it all out on PowerPoint. We need that sophistication. But there comes a time again, beyond Einstein, Stephen Hawkings, PowerPoint, and sixty years of age, when perhaps the best language of all is, again, the language of children, where the sun takes a sleep behind the trees. This is especially true about God and the great dogmas of our faith. God is ineffable and all of our language about God is more inadequate than adequate and the great dogmas of our faith are more items of the heart and gut than objects of the intellect.

And one last bit: We need more and more to trust love and surrender, to let go of ourselves, especially of our pride, our wounds, our hurts, our mistakes, our past, and our weaknesses, to give ourselves over to forgiveness. Morris West said that, at a certain age, it should come down to one word: "Thanks!" He's right, but to say that one word and mean it we need three other words: "Forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness!" UNQUOTE.

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Written by Ben Sanchez, Jr.

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Editor's Note: The columnist, Governor Sanchez, can be reached at bensanchez112@yahoo.com

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