

## INTRODUCTION: THE END IS THE BEGINNING

Old people are vital to the life of the Church. Out of their experience of life, they can provide an unparalleled source of inspiration for all. For if, in old age, a person can view life with all its limitations, disappointments and heartache, as an experience to be entered into, shared and enjoyed, they offer a sign of the validity of faith which no younger person can give. To have survived, to still be enthusiastic about what is new, and what is growing, is a living sign of hope and confidence in God based on a lifetime's experience.

Unfortunately, some elderly people withdraw, growing narrow, intolerant and self-centered. When such people claim to have faith, they give a totally distorted picture of the loving God whom they profess to follow. Wrapped up in a fear of losing or letting go of anything further in life, they become isolated and increasingly lonely. Being lonely is very different from being alone. If in old age, we have learned to let go, to move through the stages of life, accepting change and accepting ourselves and others, then we develop a completeness. Instead of suffering from loneliness, we have a "oneliness" which is an authentic sign of our oneness with our heavenly Father. We have a confidence and a genuine sharing of ourselves with him, free from fear and despair whatever our situation or limitations.

In this final unit we look at the ways in which we can learn from the rich source of knowledge and experience of the older members within our community. We also offer some suggestions of ways in which we can provide opportunities for them to develop "oneliness" with God at this important time in their life. As Karl Rahner reminds us, "The real and perennial and comprehensive task of a Christian is to be a human being whose depths are divine."