PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

The Elderly—A Blessing of the Lord

Unfortunately, relatively few in our American society would agree with my equating the aged with a blessing. But my



belief has been conirmed by the grace-filled presence of the elderly who have touched my life deeply — whose wisdom born of the experience of their fruitful years has inspired me more than the wisdom of hundreds of heralded sages. I hold in great esteem the old people whose lives have been for me a sacrament of fidelity to duty and of

self-sacrificing love. They have been the incarnation of the Lord's paradox for personal integrity and fulfillment: it is in dying that we live and it is in giving that we receive.

The American geriatric community poses a threat to those of a different philosophy. Twenty-five million now belong to this threatening community and it is predicted that by the year 2,000, 33 per cent of our population will be in that category.

What to do with them? Either we respect the values and meaning of this entire stage of human life (the Christian response) or we relegate them to the classification of the useless and unproductive, and possibly get rid of them to herald the dawn of a brave new world (a mounting pagan voice). There is no other alternative

Modern medicine has made great progress in efforts to extend the quantity of life to 67 years for the average American male and to 73 for the average female. But our society has done little to improve the social and economic conditions to make these extra years livable with dignity.

Forty per cent of those over 65 live at or below the poverty level of existence. One out of 10 lives on Social Secutity. The combination of fixed income, diminishing savings and spiraling costs has shaped the old into a class that a recent Time Magazine article labelled the new poor. Anthropologist Margaret Mead refers to our elderly as "A strangely isolated generation" for whom no niche has been provided in our society.

Robert Butler, a Washington, D.C. psychiatrist, attributes the birth of the phenomenon of development of this most neglected minority in America to an attitude called ageism which he translates simply as "not wanting to have all those ugly old people around." He predicts that by the end of the century it will be a problem equal to today's racism. Sing or plead all we want, "God Bless America," our chant or plea is being drowned out by the louder voice of our scandalous testimony that we are unwilling to reverence human life in its golden years.

We might well reflect on the emptiness of our expectations of divine blessing on

America by recalling the position the elderly commanded among God's chosen people. The Judaic community accounted it a great divine blessing for a person to have attained many years. It was the elders of the Twelve Tribes of Israel who held the prominent leadership roles in the biblical community. It was the aged patriarch who could recount the sacred history of Israel and could reveal God's purpose for His people. The prominent precept for the community's law was to honor one's elders. (Exodus 20:12)

Our society instead has equated the value of human life with vitality, youthfulness and productivity. Any aspect of life found lacking in these qualities does not merit our concern. We have succumbed to the value system promoted by commercialism. What is the philosophy of life preached each day on television and radio, in newspapers and magazines, on attractive billboards that clutter the landscape? "Preserve your youthful look at all costs. Avoid the characteristics of old age. Be accepted in society." This requires, of course, the use of the correct cosmetics, the proper tint to cover your grayness, regular visits to the health spas, and a whole litany of salvific ointments to mollify the aging process.

Productivity has become another measure of human worth. I suppose it all began with the Industrial Revolution when man was gradually replaced by the efficient machine. The computer age which followed it made us more sophisticated in our evaluation of human worth. We became numbers fed into a system rather than individuals with a unique personal contribution to offer to society. This cybernetic revolution has further lowered the age of retirement and has consigned more and more to the sentence of displacement and disposal, geared toward freeing our society from a burdening problem. The next logical step for our philosophers is to recommend the unique efficient means of displacement and disposal. Need I warn you — euthanasia is just around the corner and we have many already anxiously poised to write it down as the law of our land?

With the problem simply stated as 'more and more elderly' with fewer and fewer who care, we ask how the trend can be reversed.

This past year, the Catholic Church in America has given us a call to action through a Respect Life Program intended as a way of generating a collective awareness of our Christian responsibilities to build an American society based on justice and peace. I offer here the highly practical recommendations of the Bishops' Committee responsible for this program:

1. Our basic problems can be solved only by a fundamental reordering of the values of our society.
2. The Church Community must speak

2. The Church Community must speak out and voice its concern for human dignity at every stage in life clearly acknowledging that every individual is created in the image of God.

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

3. The Church Community must seek to build a living fellowship of believers in which aging persons will find mutual concern and respect.

4. The Church Community must serve as an advocate for older persons in demanding adequate medical care, an adequate standard of living, in-

demanding adequate medical care, an adequate standard of living, independence, opportunity for social enrichment, and a chance to communicate and cooperate with others. In this it will give witness to its genuine interest in the aging, and so affirm the dignity of man and the richness of his golden years.

5. The parish should be more aware of

of all agencies and services intended to help the aging. This is pastoral care reaching out to a large segment of each parish — and asks only the rewarding effort of assuring the elderly that they have a unique contribution to make to the life of the Church that no one else can make.

It is always an experience of the joy of the Resurrection to know that you are loved and are needed. As Pastor of the Diocese I now rejoice in the opportunity to challenge those in our area who for political or monetary motives are shuttling our elderly into locations which deprive them of services they need and deserve to uphold their personal dignity.

I write all of this as a personal tribute to the elderly who have been to me a great blessing. I detest our society and its philosophy that have relegated them to our most neglected minority. It has already condemned itself.

I embrace with all my heart these beatitudes for the friends of the aged and I thank God for the opportunities that I have had to touch their lives and to sense the joy of their youth:

Blessed are they who understand faltering step and palsied hands.

Blessed are they who know that my ears today must strive to catch the things they say.

Blessed are they who seem to know that my eyes are dim and my wits are slow.

Blessed are they with a cheery smile who stop to chat if but awhile.

Blessed are they who never say: 'You've told that story many times today."

Blessed are they who know the ways to bring back memories of yesterdays.

Blessed are they who make it known that I'm loved, respected and not alone.

pray that all of us may be so blessed!

Rich Must Share, Pontiff Tells U.N.

United Nations, N.Y. [RNS] — Pope Paul VI has appealed to the developed nations to promote a new lifestyle that will exclude both excessive consumption and "those superfluous needs that are often artificially engendered through the use of the mass media by a limited segment of society in search of riches."

The pontiff issued the message

to coincide with the opening of the special session of the U.N. Ceneral Assembly to discuss the subject of raw materials and development.

The message was handed to Secretary General Kurt Waldheim by the permanent Vatican Observer to the U.N., Msgr. Giovanni Cheli.

Rabbi Disputes Pope Paul Stand On Jerusalem

Jerusalem [RNS] — Israel's Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren has taken issue with Pope Paul over the future status of Jerusalem

The pontiff, in an address at a general audience on April 10, called for an appropriate statute with international guarantees for the Holy City — Jerusalem — and convenient juridical protection for the Holy Places:

Rabbi Coren, the leader of the country's Askenazic (or Western) Jewish community, labled the Pope's call "a merely political demand, without basis in religious or historical justice."

He said that Jerusalem's Holy Places "were never as well protected or as accessible to members of all faiths as now, under Israeli rule." A spokesman for Waldheim later said that the secretary general was "deeply satisfied by the interest of the Pope in the U.N. session."

Waldheim noted that the thinking of the pontiff on this subject coincided with his own.

Waldheim opened the special session of the 135-nation organization by saying that six fundamental issues, including the pressures by growing population for dwindling resources, "constitute apotential threat to world peace and well being."

He named the other issues as a need for renewal of determination to eradicate mass poverty a need for contingency plans to meet global food emergencies; the elimination of waste and conservation of energy, substantial disarmament to relieve pressure on resources; and an effective world monetary

system to control inflation.

Pope Paul did not mention the population issue in his message. Instead, he appealed to the industrialized countries to make greater efforts to forego their immediate advantages.

He cautioned that a lifestyle based on ever greater consumption has "deleterious effects on nature and the environment and finally on the moral fiber on man himself, especially the youth."

The Pope said that it was of the utmost necessity for the world community to bridge the growing gap between the rich and the powerful nations and those whose true development is hampered by so many obstacles. This requires a change in the situation, he said, so that raw materials bring a just and equitable measure of human well being to those who produce

The pontiff quoted from a 1961 statement by the late Pope John XXIII who said, "Through the goodwill of all, the riches of this world must serve the true benefit of all — as they were indeed destined by the Creator, who in his bountiful providence has put them at the disposal of the whole of mankind."

Pope Paul warned that despair would beset the poor and powerless, should the international community not respond to their needs. He said this despair would spur them to "aggressive search of methods, other than international cooperation to gain what they consider to be their economic rights."

He said that the giving of aid, however laudable and necessary, "is not sufficient to promote the full measure of human dignity of required by the solidarity of mankind under the fatherhood of God."

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