

# THE AGED

Even a casual observer is conscious of the growing awareness of the aging and the aged in our society. Newspapers, magazines and broadcast media carry a swelling stream of features and news articles on the problems of the aging. Growing numbers of studies and books are another barometer. Suddenly people are being bombarded with material which hammers home the twin facts that 10 per cent of the population of the United States is over 65 and all sectors of society, including the aged themselves, must help older adults to live and die with meaning and dignity.

This awareness is one of the objectives of the Respect Life program. But awareness that results only in intellectual assent is sterile. Knowledge should be a springboard for action, especially when God's gift of life is involved. The information presented here is directed toward the celebration of old age, not just for a day but for a lifetime and the best plan of action will encourage persons of all ages to respond as they are able.

Changes in the physical appearance and roles of the elderly often cause society to forget that they are not a breed apart. Most of their needs and desires are simply human and are the same as those of the young and middle-aged: the desire to be loved, to be useful, to be wanted as an important part of the family, the parish, the community.

The first awareness to be achieved, then, is attitudinal. If the communities in which the elderly live regard them as full members, then older people live in an atmosphere in which they can remain involved in the spiritual, cultural, civic and social life of the community.

The Church, especially the local church, has a duty to arouse the social consciences of its people, to change the attitudes of society toward the elderly and to effect social action on their behalf. Respect for the dignity of life is one of the fundamental teachings of the Catholic Church. If the Church does not teach and practice this great truth, there is little hope that any other group will.

The elderly have special needs, too, just as any group does. Social, financial, familial, emotional, and physical dislocation often prevent the older adult from continuing in the mainstream of life in exactly the same way as before.

If support and acceptance are given to the older members of the family, they will have the sense of belonging which gives so much meaning to life. A relationship based on the love of God and of each other is the basis of a truly Christian society. Since the family is the center of learning about and celebrating God's gift of life, any family life program should include those who have lived life longest.

Article 95 of the General Catechetical Directory, emphasizing the importance of old age, states that these members of the Church are not sufficiently recognized in the pastoral ministry. Both the parish and diocesan offices should examine how true this statement is for them and address themselves to assisting the aged in a variety of ways. No one "retires" from spiritual development. This places a serious obligation on the Church to minister to the spiritual needs of the elderly and to create and sustain a spiritual environment — often the greatest comfort of old age.

Only five per cent of the over-65 population is in institutions; the other 95 per cent reside outside institutions. These facts have implications for parishes and diocesan offices. The greatest need is not for nursing-home chaplains (although there are far too few of them) but for ministers to those living in the parish community.

Spiritual counseling and direction should have priority in any work with the elderly. The homily during Mass is an important opportunity to give support and direction to a group; but individual contact and interest are among the most beneficial services to those who are closer to death and to the vision of God than any other group in the parish community. While some preparation on the part of the counselor may be required, reverence and love for the elderly are the sine qua non for this ministry.



Working with and for the elderly brings other crucial matters into focus. Churches and religious bodies are primarily spiritual agencies. No other organization can bring the spiritual dimension to the lives of older people. But the Church can and must be concerned with human and social needs. The documents of Vatican II mandate the social mission of the Church. The Church has a unique opportunity to become a partner with other religious groups and government and private agencies in bringing services to the elderly. All these groups have some expertise to contribute, and the partnership should join spiritual, material, and social services rather than duplicate them. One proposal of the 1971 White House Conference on Aging was that every program for the elderly have as one criterion its effect on the spiritual well-being of those served.

Some of the program objectives could be:

1. An overall, long-range design for programs, services, and facilities to meet the felt and real needs of the elderly.

2. An assessment of existing resources and their adequacy and potential for contributing to the overall design.

3. The gradual attrition of obsolete programs and the creation of new programs, services, and facilities to achieve the long-range objectives.

This type of systematic planning provides for assessment and flexibility, which are also ingredients of a good plan.

Good overall planning must be responsive to the needs of the elderly of a specific community. Each parish is unique. Planning should be carried on for, by, and with the people who will benefit from the services.

Some approaches might be:

1. Mass Media. The potential of the mass media to educate, inform, and arouse — not only the elderly, but all of society — has hardly been explored, especially by church groups. While use of television may involve prohibitive expenses, radio stations often welcome a creative approach and programs which are a public service. Radio stations which carry religious programming should be approached for time for services directed to the elderly, their families and those who care for them. Almost every household in the United States has a radio, and radio is often the only link which the isolated elderly have with the world outside. Pre-retirement planning, the worthy use of leisure, the meaning of aging, lifetime learning, interviews, religious services celebrating life and aging — these are but a few of the topics and areas that need to be researched and competently presented. The subject of "Death with Dignity" and the spectrum of meanings and moral issues involved must be explained locally and nationally.

2. Housing. Each year more religious groups become involved in sponsoring housing for the elderly with the assistance of federal, state, and municipal funding. This is a service where the

"something extra" — Christ-like concern for the human and spiritual needs of persons — is enormously important. The philosophy that housing is not just "bricks and mortar" but involves a way of life — and that providing housing is a ministry — has produced many successful housing experiences.

3. Set up parish-community information banks. Governmental agencies and private organizations have programs, benefits, and opportunities for the elderly of which many of them are now aware. The Food Stamp program, employment opportunities, financing, and consumer protection services are examples. The parish could provide space and telephone service for a group of older adults to develop and staff the "bank." The parish bulletin can be used to inform the parish of general services available to the elderly.

4. Volunteer resources. Almost every organization needs volunteers. The opportunities for seniors to be useful in this capacity are limitless. The aging person who uses his talents to help others contributes, significantly to increased public awareness that older persons are valuable resources. Schools and CCD centers need teacher aides, tutors, personnel in resource centers, secretaries, library assistants, A-V coordinators, playground assistants. Parent-school organizations can benefit from having the perspective and the services of grandparents. Since they usually have more free time than parents, they can be counted on for many valuable services to the school and the organization. Hospitals and nursing homes depend for many necessary services on volunteers. The Red Cross, the American Cancer Society, the United Way, the Heart Fund, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, and the Foster Grandparents Program, to mention only a few service organizations, could not function so effectively without the help of many volunteers.

5. Transportation. Parish societies and individuals can form a volunteer transportation corps to bring the elderly to church services, doctors, stores, and social events.

6. Develop a senior citizen center. Comprehensive services can be developed in a center to make it more than a social or recreational meeting place, important as this is. All or some of the following services might be included: social rehabilitation, dietary services, legal aid, spiritual counseling, recreation, occupational and rehabilitative therapies, health services and education. An undertaking such as this could be sponsored by a group of local churches with the financial assistance of the federal, state, or local agency on aging and the cooperation of schools and colleges.

7. Parish Organizations. Make room for the leadership, representation, and membership of the elderly in parish organizations. Their experience is made use of and their interest sustained in this way. Older parishioners often complain that their participation in parishes they have helped support and build is no longer desired. They feel rejected because they can no longer contribute as they once did. In offering the facilities of the parish to the elderly for their meetings, liturgies, etc., special concern should be shown for the cleanliness, heating and attractiveness of the rooms. This will give the group a sense of worth and dignity.

8. Religious Experiences. Home Masses, the scriptural rosary, dialogue homilies, shared prayer and other ways of union with God meaningful to the elderly themselves can be combined with more traditional forms to provide occasions for deepening the experience of God. The roles of deacon and extraordinary minister of the Blessed Sacrament can be the beginning of a new life for some elderly parishioners. The response of many elderly religious to contemporary prayer forms and new religious experience is proof that the aged are open to the "new" when it has value.

9. Outreach Programs. Every parish has some elderly who, because of physical disability, are not able to leave their homes. An outreach program should include home visitation, transportation, bringing the Blessed Sacrament, reading scripture, praying, telephone reassurance, Meals-on-Wheels, ascertaining and meeting the special needs of individual shut-ins. Much of this can be done with already existing community agencies.