

The Church Steps Out

Traditionally, concern for the elderly has been left to the parish priest, a few friends, and dutiful children. On the urging of the 1973 U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops, however, many parish groups are discovering the benefits of ministering to the elderly. This ministry is intended to enrich the religious lives of both the elderly person and the involved community.

According to 1970 census figures, the population of elderly New Yorkers has grown over five times since the turn of the century, while the total population has grown only 1 1/2 times. The report of the diocesan Nursing Home and Liturgy Task Forces states that nursing home residency increased 45 per cent in the 153 nursing homes in the diocese between October 1969 and October 1973.

Sister Catherine Ann, of St. Alphonsus, who works with the elderly in two Auburn nursing homes, says that the gratitude of the elderly makes working with them a very humbling experience.

Sister Judy Reger, head of the Nursing Home Task Force, explains that many home residents feel themselves isolated from the world. They miss their independence.

The head of ministry to three area nursing homes, Sister Mary Elizabeth of St. Boniface Church, says that many people in nursing homes formerly were communicants who want to feel that they still are part of parish life and hunger for any closeness to the Church. She relates this experience to show how much the elderly appreciate an opportunity to express their faith: one patient, asked whether he would mind receiving holy

communion from a sister replied, "What matters to me is that I receive Jesus. It makes no difference to me who brings him."

A special ministry to nursing homes in Auburn is a delight to the home residents because it gives them an opportunity to see children. Through St. Alphonsus Church, Sister Ann Catherine organized a program in which entire families prepare their own liturgy and carry communion to nursing homes weekly.

Father Michael Mahler of Holy Apostles says that older people have much to give in return. "The problem is that people don't realize what they have to offer." Sister Judy Reger recently took two Heritage House residents to a workshop in Geneva. She reports that they were the most sympathetic to the difficulties in ministering to the elderly and offered the most ideas.

Sister Pierre of St. Andrew's feels that the elderly can give prayer. She notes too their creative abilities: crocheting, sewing, carpentry.

Older people "give a special insight, a realistic factor, to life when they are able to bring the past to bear on the present," Father Mahler muses.

Perhaps the neighborhood youngster, riding past John McGovern's house as Father Mahler emerged from their communion service knew the best gift that the elderly have to offer — themselves. "Hey, Father," he called, "Have you been to see Pops? He's cool!"

Elderly people give unstintingly of this their best gift with what Sister Pierre calls their "goodness of heart." People who work with the elderly testify to

more optimism, love, faith, hope, joy, humility, tolerance as a result of their contacts with the elderly. Sister Pierre says that a spirit of love seems to flow out of an elderly person into the person ministering to them, and back. "When you work with them they're on your mind all the time. You want to do for them and they want to do for you." Each elderly face, when it shows suffering or loneliness, reveals Christ in a different way for Sister Catherine Ann.

Father Mahler says it gives him great joy to bring Christ to people who are lonely, who perhaps have lost their loved ones, so that the only meaningful people left are Christ and the representative of his Church. Their optimism and hope strengthen his own; their deep faith encourages him and enriches his own prayer life.

Mrs. Joyce Meteyer, who assists at St. John's Home through St. Boniface parish, feels that working with the elderly has given her greater tolerance. "We'll all be in that same situation some day." Now she wants to help instead of hurry older people.

The biggest selling point for working with the elderly came from Sister Pierre. "It keeps me young!", the 73-year-old nun declared.



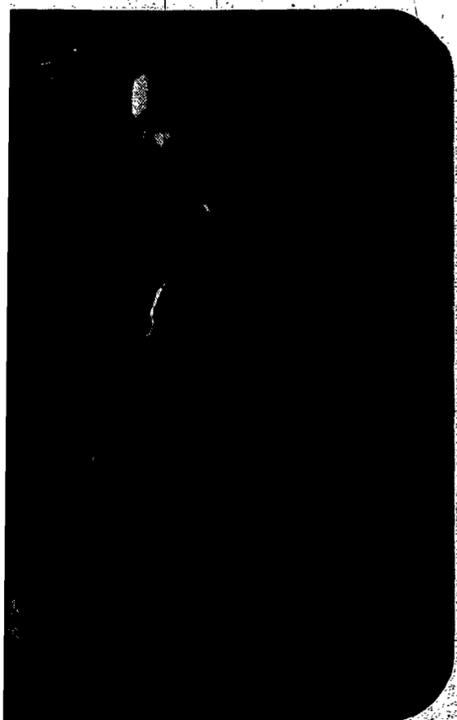
Father John Norris and Sister Kathleen Fletcher accompany a group of Blessed Sacrament school children after a visit to the Rutgers, a proprietary home.



Mrs. Ora Keator, right, guides Mrs. Madelyn McKague's grocery cart. Mrs. Keator drives Mrs. McKague to the market and helps her with her shopping.



Sister M. Pierre, a Sister of Mercy who has spent over 50 years in the sisterhood is a daily visitor to the elderly, the sick and the bedridden. In the photo above Sister joins Mrs. Ida Wasala in extending wishes for a happy birthday to John Wasala.



me liturgy for John McGovern.



Father Mahler's home visit enabled McGovern to receive Communion and Father's Blessing.

