

Mercy Center the with Aging: An Advocate for the Elderly

By Teresa A. Parsons

As director of social work services, Sister Anne Maloy, RSM, used to place outpatients from Lakeside Memorial Hospital in Brockport. She recalls working with families suddenly thrust into a medical crisis with an older relative, needing to make immediate decisions about that person's life and care, but feeling helplessly unaware of options or services available to them.

Since she established the Mercy Center with the Aging in 1983, Sister Anne and her staff have saved at least one person from the stress of fearing the unknown. Kathy Krugel of Greece attended the series of educational programs the center held this spring at her parish, Holy Name of Jesus Church. When Krugel had only one more session to go, her 83-year-old mother, Esther, suffered a stroke.

"The Mercy Center had really made me aware of the hospital's services," she said. She knew, for instance, that when her mother was released the hospital would refer her to a visiting nurse service. Although the hospital would have provided the service in any case, knowing what to expect really eased Krugel's mind.

"Beyond that, they really make you aware that this is a country of aging people and a church of aging people," Krugel added. Her mother has made a remarkable recovery and is now living on her own again — one of the center's prime goals.

Above all, the Mercy Center promotes what Sister Anne calls "a wholistic approach to aging." By recognizing that growing older is a life-long process, she believes people will examine their own attitudes and become better attuned to the needs of society's fastest-growing segment.

For that reason, the center is seeking to educate parishes and community groups to minister more effectively to older persons. Their stated goal is "to enhance the quality of life of older people in our churches and in society, especially by maintaining them as long as possible in their own homes and neighborhoods."

Churches are the natural bases for ministry to the elderly. Building on the trust given to church representatives, the Mercy Center can help older people take advantage of agency

services they might otherwise be too fearful or proud to use.

By coordinating ministry to the elderly on many levels — parish, regional, diocesan and state — and on an interfaith basis, the center can also bring churches and individuals together with the network of existing services. Resources and information can be pooled within the community or neighborhood to identify unmet needs and organize new programs.

The family education series, one focus of the center's activities, is available to any church or organization. So far, two area parishes — St. Andrew's and Holy Name — have sponsored the series, and more than a half-dozen others are negotiating programs for the fall, according to Sister Anne.

Sessions in the series cover such topics as: I Am A Growing-Older Person; The Development and Needs of Older Adults; Family Conflicts and Responsibilities; Direct Services to the Older Person; Legal and Financial Planning, Present and Future; Alzheimer's Disease and Elder Abuse; The Role of the Church and the Third Age; Spirituality of Aging; and Ethical Issues. Individual talks may also be arranged.

Working with an individual parish or group, the center's staff uses the education series as a starting point to identify an area's elderly population and its needs. Staff from the center will then help set goals for meeting local needs, including recruiting volunteers and providing information.

Sister Anne's social work experience is complemented by the center's assistant director, Sister M. Gratia L'Esperance, who has a strong theological background. A former diocesan consultant for adult religious education, Sister Gratia also served as assistant director for field education at St. Bernard's Seminary.

Sister Anne worked as a student intern in gerontology at Loretto Geriatric Center while she attended Syracuse University, and was later pastoral assistant at St. Anne's Church in Rochester. She also serves the diocese as representative to the state Catholic Conference Commission on the Elderly.

An advisory board of 12 representatives from the health care, legal, financial and ministerial professions, and retired persons provides an additional resource for the

center. A student intern and several volunteers round out the staff.

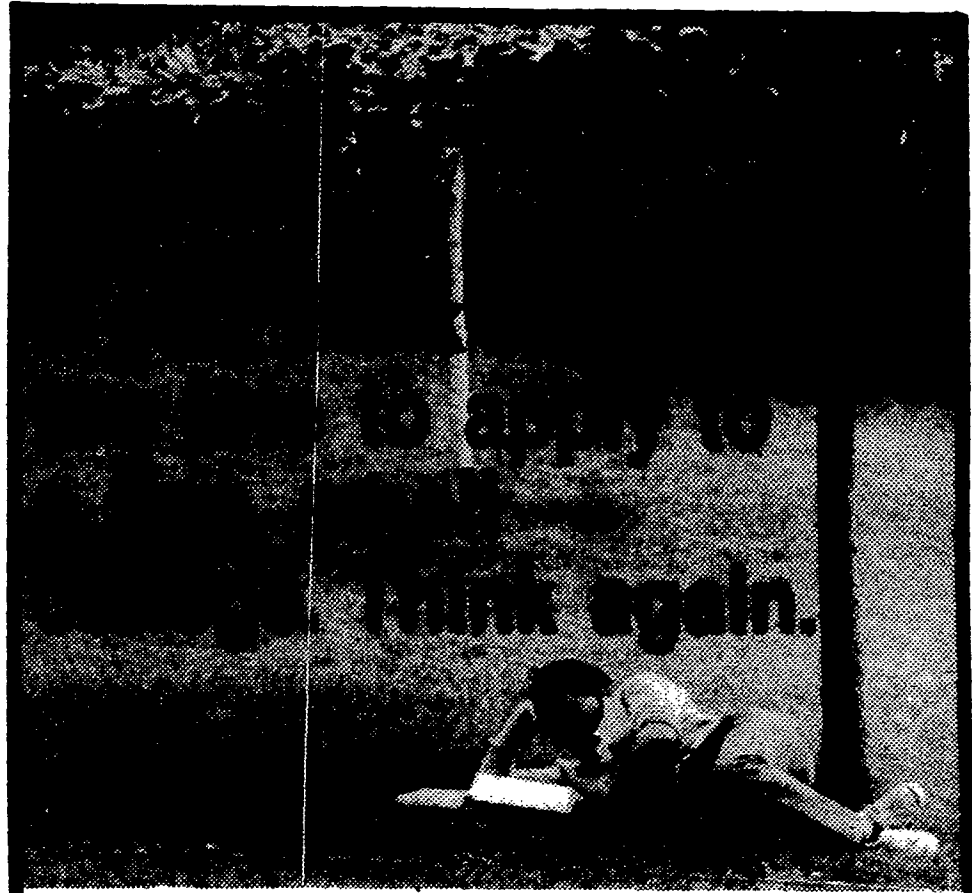
In yet another venture, the Mercy Center is coordinating an ecumenical church group in the city's southwest area — Southwest Ecumenical Ministries or SWEM. Since there is no single central provider of service to the elderly in that area, SWEM is trying to fill the gap. As part of that effort, an open forum is planned Thursday, July 25. All local churches, agencies and neighborhood groups that have concerns for the elderly are invited to come and share their views on what's needed and what's being offered.

In turn, SWEM will report on its effort to combat the loneliness and isolation from

which elderly people suffer. Specific plans include a network for visiting elderly people in their homes, distributing a directory of services especially for older people, and, in the longer run, trying to set up a transportation system.

Meanwhile, both Holy Name and St. Andrew's are continuing the process the Mercy Center series began. At Holy Name, five events for seniors are already scheduled, and a committee is working on assessing the overall needs of the parish's elderly.

For more information on the Mercy Center's services or the upcoming SWEM forum, contact Sisters Anne Maloy or M. Gratia L'Esperance at (716)235-8731.



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A Word for Sunday with Father Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 5:21-43; (R1) Wisdom 1:13-15; (R2) 2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15.

Often we hear the remark: "If your God is so good, why does He cause suffering and death?"

God does not cause suffering and death. "God did not make death." (R1)

When God created the first man, He put him in a world that was a paradise. And He meant him to be immortal. Like a kindly father, God warned the first man not to try to be what he was not — a non-creature, a being totally independent, someone who would try to make it through life on his own without God. Should he try, God warned that he would bring death and all kinds of sufferings down upon his own head and the entire race.

Like a wayward child who neglects his mother's advice, plays with fire and gets burned, man spurned God's admonition, heeded the lies of the devil, and unloosed death and suffering upon the world. Thus Scripture says, "By the envy of the devil death entered the world." The devil's envy provided only the opportunity to choose wrong, but the choice was ultimately ours. We ourselves must be held responsible for death.

The gospel reaffirms God's opposition to suffering and death. Whenever Jesus confronts these two evils, He removes them when He finds faith. Thus He cured the gynecological problem of a woman who had suffered for a dozen years without any relief at all in sight, and He raised a young girl of 12 from the dead.

Still, why does God permit, if He does not will them, suffering and death? Suffering and death can become privileged opportunities for growth in selfless love.

Shakespeare wrote: "Sweet are the uses of adversity" and indeed they are! As Father Tabb put it: "The little flower that bloomed

in Bethlehem/ Never gave forth so sweet an odor/ Until it was put into the vase of the cross." It is the crushed rose that gives the sweetest perfume; the trampled grape that sheds the ruby wine; the charred wood that makes possible the charcoal drawing; the field dunged with rotted death that gives the richest harvest.

And as for death itself, was it not St. Ambrose in his funeral homily for his brother, Satyrus, who said: "Death, in fact, was not in nature, but it became part of nature. God did not establish death in the beginning, but gave it as a remedy ... After the transgression of Adam and man's condemnation to long labors and unbearable sorrow, his life became wretched. Consequently, an end had to be established for evils, so that death might restore what life had lost."

Death, therefore, for the Christian is a remedy — an end to this vale of tears, and a beginning — a door to a new and far better life. Life is not ended by death; life is changed into one that is wonderful and strange.

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