

The third age: Commission explores Church role in 'graying' of society

By Emily Morrison

Bridging the intergenerational gap between the young and the elderly, the adult child and the aging parent, taps an unlimited wellspring. "The third age," as defined by the Diocesan Commission on Aging, can be a vital community resource rather than the stereotypical "burden on society" that many people associate with aging. Both the Church and society at large stand to reap substantial benefits, in terms of spirituality, moral status and service both to and from the elderly.

Bishop Clark's diocesan commission was appointed in the fall of 1985 to assist the New York State Catholic Conference Commission on the Elderly in its task of assessing the challenges presented by a perceptible "graying" of society. Both the state commission's 1985 draft paper and the diocesan commission's final report (published February 11 of this year) delineate the differences between various developmental stages.

The "first age," that of the child and adolescent in the role of learner, has received a great deal of attention in the Church community, according to the diocesan report. The Church has also assisted those in the "second age" — young adulthood through middle age — in their primary role as parents, helping their children to prepare for the sacraments.

"It still remains a challenge for the Church community to expand its ministries among the middle-aged and particularly with older adults, who begin the third age of life when they lay aside the tasks of their careers and child-rearing to enter a new time of opportunity — as long as 20 or 30 years — when they can extend their relationships, service and spiritual growth beyond familiar bounds," states the introduction to the diocesan report.

People over 65 are living longer, more productive lives in the latter part of the 20th century. Since 1900, according to Monsignor Charles J. Fahey, director of the Third Age Center at Fordham University and staff director of the work of the state Commission on the Elderly, life expectancy has increased by 60 percent, from 46.3 years at the turn of the century to 74.2 years at the present time. One-half of all people in the history of the world who have lived to be 60 years old are alive today.

Similar statistics provide dramatic evidence of the increasing role senior citizens play in both the Church and society. Two-thirds of all people alive today will live into their eighties, while 90 percent will die between the ages of 77 and 93. In terms of family life, says Monsignor Fahey, four

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generations of extended family are now normative, and five are common. Many couples will live longer together without the possibility of having children than with it. Seventy percent of women over the age of 65 live alone, while 70 percent of men over 65 live with their wives.

The average age of women religious in the United States is 62 years, a figure projected to increase by one year with every successive calendar year. Among diocesan priests in New York state, the average age is 61 years. The following figures underscore the perceptible lag in vocations among younger men. In New York state in 1960, the seminarian priest ratio was .85 seminarians for every priest. By 1983, the ratio had dropped to only .15 seminarians for every priest.

In recognition of the formidable challenges posed by these demographic realities, the state commission was established to reflect on certain essential questions. "What is meant by this new gift of extended life which we are the first persons in the history of the world to experience?" asks Monsignor Fahey. "How can the Church best respond to persons who become frail as they grow older? How can the Church help us interpret the experience of a normal aging process, and what are the implications of a longer life on earlier years? How can the Church reflect upon this phenomenon in the context of sacred scripture, which, written in the time of a short and uncertain lifespan, is frequently silent on issues of aging?"

Sister Anne Maloy, RSM, director of the



Mercy Center with the Aging, was appointed by Bishop Clark to chair the diocesan commission he established to participate on the state's Commission on the Elderly with seven other New York dioceses. This statewide group was formed to undertake a process of discernment of issues of aging and, by extension, to enhance the physical, social and spiritual lives of older people in the community of the Church and society.

"Three years ago, the bishops of New York State were asked by the New York State Catholic Conference to send one delegate from each of the eight dioceses to participate on the commission," explains Sister Anne, who served as the delegate from the Diocese of Rochester, attending state commission meetings at Fordham's Third Age Center. "The focus of the commission came out of the visions of the bishops of New York state, who looked at the whole issue as well as the specific needs of elderly people."

The state commission's draft of three position papers was published in the fall of 1985. A process of in-depth analysis was then initiated within each of the participating dioceses, which included Albany, Brooklyn, Buffalo, New York, Ogdensburg, Rochester, Rockville Center and Syracuse.

"The bishop, through my representation, agreed to form a diocesan commission on aging, in conjunction with the Division of Social Ministry, which is directed by Father John Firpo," says Sister Anne. "We came back and set up a 25-member group to react to the three (Fordham) position papers."

The topics addressed in each of the three papers were: "Spirituality, Pastoral Care and the Third Age," "The Moral Status of Older Persons" and "The Service Role of the Church and the Third Age."

Spirituality and pastoral care

Spirituality — what an older person believes and how those convictions are expressed in liturgy, prayer and sacrament — was paired in the first position paper with pastoral care, which encompassed the responses of both the Church and its members to the dimensions of the spirituality of older people.

Certain basic assumptions about the spiritual lives and experiences of both frail and vigorous senior citizens were included in the text of this initial position paper. Among them were the following reflections:

1) There is a distinct spirituality of the third age.
2) The Christian faith does inform the older person's understandings of the mysteries of life and death, good and evil, suffering and joy, and perhaps the process of aging as well.

3) Vatican II introduced liturgical and theological reform which has been important to the spiritual lives of older persons. (Note: *The generally positive tone and content of*

the state commission's treatment of this matter focused primarily on the challenges presented by Vatican II, for both the elderly and younger members of the Church. The diocesan report, however, added, "The impact of the changes in the Church since Vatican II has been welcomed by some older people; for others, however, the difficulty of accepting the changes persists.")

as well as younger people as lectors, acolytes, ministers of hospitality, ushers and Eucharistic ministers was also recommended. Another important area of concentration involved ensuring that church buildings are accessible and have heating, sound systems, lighting and physical environments that adequately meet the needs of elderly parishioners.

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4) Changing physical, social and personal realities, often unique to older persons, are important to (their quests) for holiness.

5) Older persons are well-suited to be of pastoral and human support to those of younger generations as well as to peers.

6) Just as (the elderly) live out their spiritual lives in a personal relationship with their Lord, so too, (they) continue to live out their lives of faith within the context of the Church community.

7) The phenomenon of aging is new, and the older persons of tomorrow are likely to be quite different from the older persons of today.

Five key issues of prayer, liturgy and other celebrations, education, relationship to others and pastoral care (both by and to the elderly) were addressed in this position paper. The final consideration holds a special significance for Sister Anne. "It's a whole new challenge to the Church today: taking a look at the gifts as well as the needs of those in the third age," she observes. "The important thing is to keep the issue in an intergenerational realm, and not to isolate the elderly. It's not a separation but an integration. We need to look at the needs of the elderly as well as the gifts and resources they offer."

Specific recommendations made in the diocesan report included responses to the issues of spirituality and pastoral care. Among them were the provision of a range of liturgical and enrichment experiences for elderly persons, including traditional devotions and renewal opportunities. Involvement of older

The moral status of the third age

"The dramatic increase in average life expectancy and a modest increase in longevity, coupled with the growth both absolutely and relatively in the number of older persons, give rise to a new ethical agenda," reads the introduction to the state commission's second position paper.

This "demographic imperative" led commission members to establish a framework for applying the notion of certain moral rights and responsibilities to the aging. A focus on such issues as the preferential concern of society for the poor and the equitable distribution of both benefits and burdens was paralleled by a consideration of the rights of elderly women, blacks, Hispanics, southeast Asians and developmentally disabled. Marriage and family life, parish responsibilities, the workplace, individuals within the context of government, older Americans and the political process, intergenerational conflict and ageism in American culture were also topics for study and reflection.

Diocesan commission members were divided into three sub-groups, each one assigned to examine one of the three position papers. Sister M. Rene McNiff, administrator of St. James Mercy-Hospital in Hornell, participated in the moral status study group. "The fact that many people are not frail elderly, but elderly with the strength and energy to address issues they might not have 50 years ago, was an important consideration," she reports.

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