

The third age

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Sister Anne Maloy agrees that it's important to examine the conceptual difference between normal aging and frailty. "People are living normally longer, because of technology and improvements in health care," she points out. "Back in the '60s, because people needed to be advocated for, the image developed of the elderly as poor, disabled, isolated victims of crime. Now, in the '80s, we have the image of Joan Collins," she adds. "My hope is that we're going to look to the younger, healthier retirees as great resources in the Church, who can even help with the care of the frail elderly."

Even the institutionalized elderly, once perceived by many people as infirm and disabled, can make valuable contributions to society. "Older people that are institutional-

ized have an awful lot to give," affirms Vincent Parks, administrator of St. John's Home in Rochester, and another member of the moral status study group. "Maybe they can't reach out as far as younger people who are more mobile. But if we could reach into nursing homes, there would be far greater opportunity for them to make a contribution to society." Parks cited foster grandparent programs, school tutoring, skill banks, participation in sacramental programs and volunteer work as possible outlets for the creative energies of institutionalized elders. One wheelchair-bound 90-year-old resident of St. John's, for example, crochets doll clothes that she donates to the Salvation Army for needy children.

The inactivity of people over the age of 85 is a misconception, Parks states. "The average age of admission to nursing homes is 84.7 years," he elaborates. "These people are active on a more limited basis, because of lack of transportation. The key issue from my perspective is that when people are institutionalized, it doesn't mean they're lost to society," Parks emphasizes. "They're just another segment of it; they're still able to make significant contributions. We're forever trying to overcome the stigma of institutionalization. Elderly people in institutions are not a burden on society."

The service role of the Church

The state commission's third and final position paper challenges Church members of all ages to "give a new attentiveness to the gifts, talents and needs of older persons to both serve and be served as valuable members of our Christian community." Protecting the dignity of the aged, education about the aging process, intergenerational solidarity, the role of the laity and the subsidiary function of the Church bureaucracy in facilitating efforts at the parish level are considered and examined in the text of this section of the state commission's 1985 draft paper.

Services provided by the diocese, the individual parish and non-parochial institutions and agencies — educational institutions, Catholic charities, health care programs and hospitals, residential health care facilities and home care providers — are given detailed attention in this paper.

In the diocesan report of February 11, the theological implications of each position paper were delineated, as well as certain basic principles and recommendations, both general and specific. Networks that would supply volunteers to church projects, hospitals, nursing homes and other institutions, as well as provision of funding for services to low-income people, were among specific proposals for future action.

The Division of Social Ministry, under the direction of Father John Firpo, will be responsible for implementing many of the report's recommendations. He and Sister Anne Maloy have been asked by the bishop to stay on as coordinators, to put together a systematic and planned diocesan response to the report, assessing present programs within the diocese and making existing agencies more inclusive of services to the elderly. The Catholic Family Center, for example, already provides vital services that the diocese would like to make more widely known.

An accessibility study has so far been completed for all parishes within Monroe County, according to Father Firpo, who plans to branch out into Livingston County and the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions. Efforts to promote legislative advocacy for third age issues are already being enacted at the state level, and elderly representatives are currently seated on the boards of directors of all three regions of the Division of Social Ministry.

As for the needs of elderly residents of rural areas, commission member Sister Rene McNiff of St. James Mercy Hospital in Steuben County reports that the hospital has set up small satellite clinics in such villages as Woodhall, Troupsburg and Greenwood to bring primary health care closer to people whose single largest problem appears to be a lack of transportation. The hospital also provides a "lifeline" service to the isolated elderly, "a phone connection between people at home and the emergency room at the hospital," says Sister Rene. "There's a new thrust of networking between parishes and the diocese," she adds. "Isolation is a big problem in rural areas. But you can always find somebody who's just as lonely living in a 500-room apartment building in the city."

Taking care of physical needs by providing adequate services is a vital dimension of third age service, yet emotional support is perhaps equally important. "Older people need more help with the changes from Vatican II, with

other critical issues," says Sister Anne. "How we help people face death; how we interlink between the neighborhood and the institution, when the elderly person's heart is in their parish but they've left to enter a nursing home; how we provide support for the caregiver — usually the daughter or daughter-in-law — these issues all deserve our attention."

Future efforts on the part of Sister Anne and Father Firpo will diverge in two related directions. "We're taking a look at the whole bureaucratic system of the Church on a vertical level," Sister Anne points out. "And we're reaching out to parishes on a horizontal level."

This coming September, the New York State Conference of Catholic Bishops will meet once again with the state Commission on the Elderly. "We'll be giving them our final report. In a sense, it's their vision, as well as that of the local participants," says Sister Anne, who adds that a handbook of local services is already under way.

"It's not in the dim future," she concludes. "The third age is already here."

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