

Elderly lead on life's journey

By Sister Elizabeth McMillan, RSM

Within the context of shared faith, frail elderly persons can provide younger people with the courage to face their own future aging, loss of independence, and ultimate death. They invite others to yield a measure of independence in order to grow spiritually.

By sharing an older person's journey of faith, the young learn about the kind of security and peace gained through entrusting oneself to the One who loves us unconditionally.

The Christian image of the pilgrimage suggests a community response to God's call where the elderly are an integral part. The spiritual pilgrimage followed by each elderly person is, of course, unique. Most share, however, the common experience of the major vocational changes — retirement and diminishment of parental responsibilities.

Because of these changes, they often suffer the loss of social and economic status, and they often suffer declining health, particularly as they reach old age. Younger people need to be sensitive to the burdens the elderly bear, as well as to the contribution the elderly can make to the spiritual richness of the community.

Families must be sensitive to their aging relatives as they experience gradual debilitation, physical pain and anxiety. Many old persons fear abandonment

and social isolation more than anything. Yet within a perspective of faith, no one is ever alone.

God invites us to become a people, a community in which all belong to and care for each other. This vision of life gives priority to human solidarity. It implies a commitment to building family and community relationships, and clashes with the many forms of individualism that so often lead to conflict and social disintegration in modern society.

Community members offer daily expressions of faith and hope to one another, and, together, come to accept aging as a gift as well as a challenge.

The Church's concern for the elderly must be given practical and effective expression in parish and diocesan programs, and in public policy initiatives on behalf of the frail elderly.

Researchers have preliminary data showing that, on the average, 26 percent of the members in any given parish are likely to be age 65 or older. Some parishes consist almost entirely of persons over age 65. These parishioners present unique pastoral challenges to the church.

Every parish, particularly those with many elderly members, should develop a pastoral plan with the participation of the elderly themselves. The development of an effective plan presupposes a systematic assessment of the elderly's needs in the parish and surrounding community along with an assess-



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ment of resources.

The plan should reflect the unique personality of the parish and its special needs and capabilities. Features common to all plans might be (1) elimination of barriers to participation in worship and parish activities; (2) outreach to the homebound (e.g., home-delivered meals, Communion, phone calls); (3) support for family members who are the primary caregivers of the frail elderly (e.g., respite help, links to social service and health care agencies).

Pastoral care for the elderly is urgent because of the growing number of frail elderly living alone with limited resources. Parish volunteers who reach out to these persons — to help with meals, transportation, personal errands, even a little conversation — are offering them a lifeline.

Within a faith perspective, our passage through life is a continual call to conversion, a call to compassionate caring for each other. It is a call to community.

If our concern for the elderly-at-risk is to be practical and effective, our efforts must go beyond family, parish and neighborhood commitments. Catholic leaders must become advocates for government protection and support of the elderly.

Formal systems of care should be designed to help individuals and families carry the burden of disability and to provide that which individuals and families cannot provide.

Government policy and programming should favor initiatives that support informal caregiving, and protect from abandonment those without family and financial resources.

Within a faith perspective, our passage through life is a continual call to conversion, a call to compassionate caring for each other. It is a call to community.

Each of us is moving toward a shared life together, and no one can be abandoned. And it is the elderly, who may be physically frail and economically vulnerable, that can lead us in life's journey.

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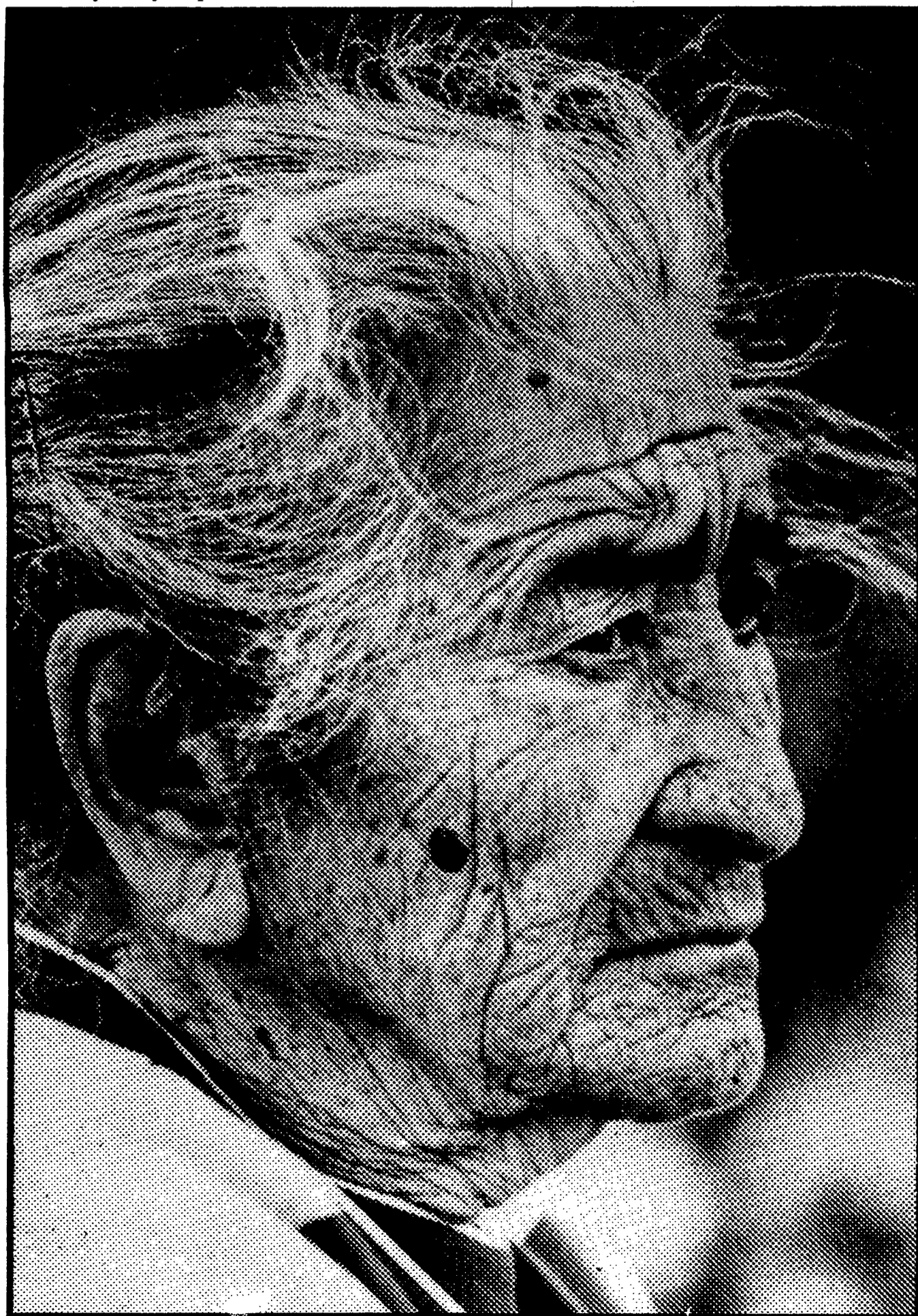


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