

Retired priests experience blend of freedom and loss

By Father John S. Hayes
Guest contributor

Retirement is a potentially traumatic experience for anyone, but especially so for a priest, bereft as he is of support from a family of his own — the final toll that celibacy takes. Old age with all of its problems, illnesses and decrepitudes is a burden many priests carry alone.

The Diocese of Rochester makes provision for the retired priest with a pension of \$625 per month, and provides living space in rectories of the retiree's choice. Bishop Matthew H. Clark prefers that retired priests do that rather than living in an apartment. There is no diocesan residence for retired priests.

Bishop Lawrence B. Casey initiated a retirement program in the mid-1950s when, as personnel director, he asked a few priests to resign their assignments for reasons other than health. At the time, no regulations had been established for such procedures. Hence those affected expressed dismay — "disgraced" one of them said — at this first effort to retire pastors.

Bishop Casey's initiative was soon followed by regulations about retirement on the part of the worldwide and local church as well. In the "Decree on Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church" promulgated by Pope Paul VI Oct. 28, 1965, for example, the Fathers of Vatican II said, "When bishops and others have become less capable of fulfilling their duties properly because of the increasing burden of age ... they are earnestly requested to offer their resignation from office either on their own initiative or upon the invitation of competent authority."

A refinement of this decree is to be found in the Revised Code of Canon Law (1983) establishing the age for the retirement of bishops and pastors at 75.

Well-aware of these retirement regulations, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, made them imperative in the local church during the mid-1960s. Bishop Dennis W. Hickey, personnel director at that time, pointed out Bishop Sheen's pervading interest in implementing these regulations. In fact, he dispatched Bishop Hickey to bring notice of retirement to four old pastors. "Three," Bishop Hickey said, "were quite docile. The other insisted strongly that his retirement was a punishment, not a prize."

On the level of the local church, however, further refinement developed in the late-1960s, when the Priests' Council — as a result of extensive deliberation — advanced the retirement age to 70. An opportunity was then provided for younger priests to assume the mantle of pastor and for older priests to surrender reins of responsibility.

Bishop Joseph L. Hogan approved this plan proposed by the Priests' Council, and it is still in effect. In June of this year, the Diocese of Rochester began phasing in an amended policy. For the majority of priests, the retirement age will remain 70. But under special circumstances, priests by 1993 will be allowed to retire from administrative duties as early as 67.

Great expectations

Psalm 92 observes that those who are steadfast in their attendance at temple "shall bear fruit even in old age." Thus retirement gives older priests an opportunity to carry on the sacramental aspects of ministry without the administrative demands — an attractive prospect.

One young pastor, queried about his thoughts on retirement, spoke for many when he said, "I look forward to the freedom that comes with retirement, allowing me to pursue the many special interests I have."

An older priest cited counseling, teaching, substituting at Mass for priests on vacation or sabbatical, and offering the sacrament of reconciliation as aspects of priestly ministry he might find attractive after retirement.

One fairly recent retiree offered positive observations on his new status. First, he rejoiced in "freedom from material concerns ... You know, the boiler in the school is out of commission; there's a leak in the roof of the convent; meetings, more meetings."

"I'm free now to do priestly things, with much more time for prayer," he continued. "I'm reading the prayers of the church with deeper meaning. It's great."

The patriarch of the Southern Tier, Father Thomas F. Brennan, not long ago expressed some interesting ideas about retirement. "I expected to work until I died," he remarked. "I was not anxious to retire, but I was willing to do what the bishop wanted. I see a vast difference between the priesthood, a lifetime vocation, and a business career. I am retired for 15 years now and I say the best thing about it is the relief from responsibility."

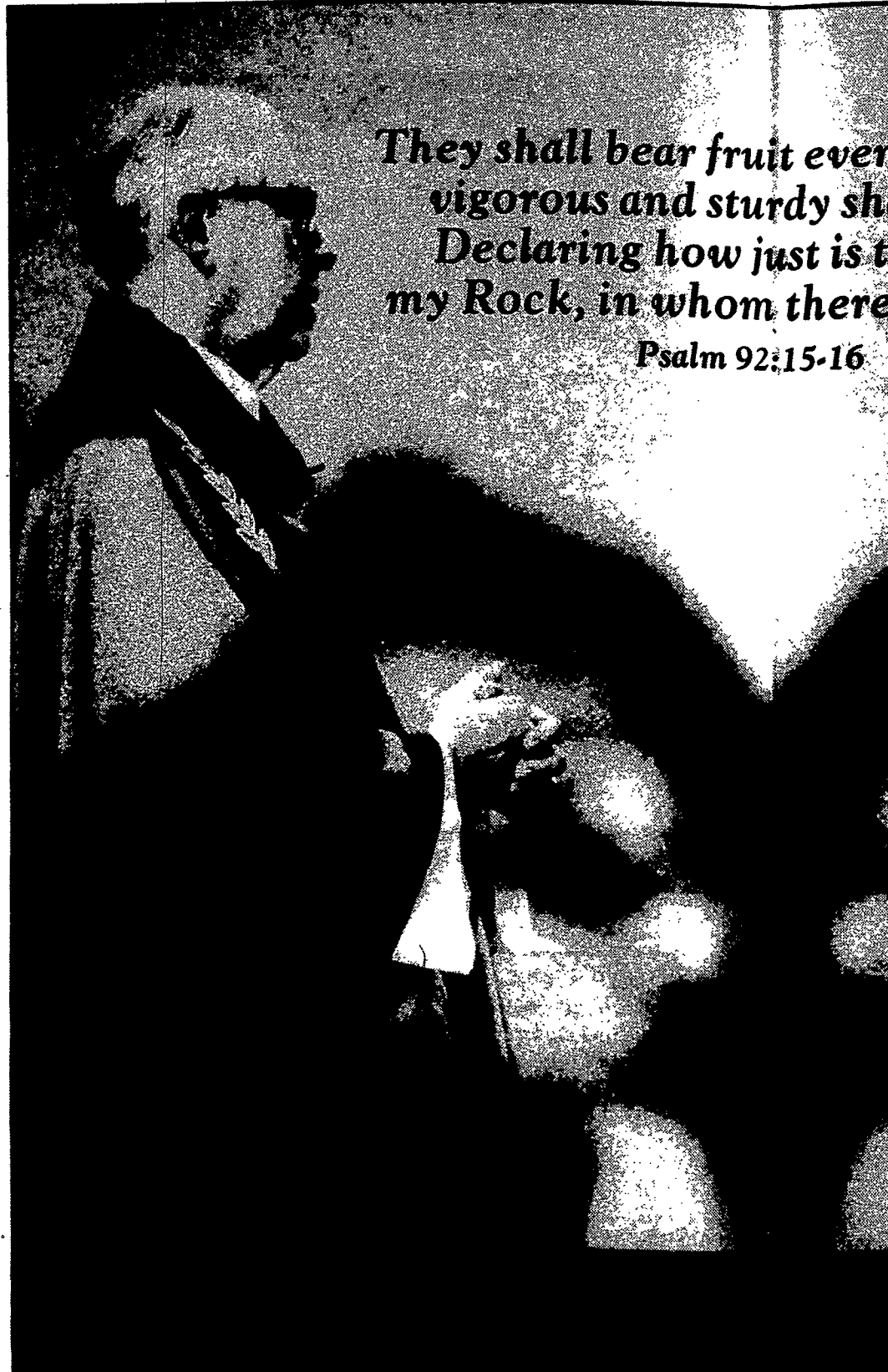
Harsh reality

"I didn't really face up to the reality of retirement until the very day it happened," one priest admitted. Such a remark is unexpected, since the policy had been in vogue for so many years and should provide no surprise.

Still resentment sadly takes its toll. "I'll never put on my collar again," a retiring priest might assert. This statement will prove false. "I shall never go into the common room again," another retiree might aver. This comment may be an accurate prediction.

Staying on in the rectory where one was once pastor has its hazards. As one former pastor remarked, "Here I am backed into one little room, the corner of a house, which in a way was once my own." Second-guessing the new pastor proves a constant temptation on the part of a retiree in his old domain, and resentment follows. Kipling's line, to "watch the things I gave my life to broken," is a given here.

A few months into his retirement, Father Raymond J. Wahl, former vicar of Auburn, observed, "I prepared my family. I prepared my parishioners. I prepared myself for retirement. I still find it devastating." Like Father Wahl, some retired priests find, "when you were a young man you could go wherever you wished. But when you are old another will take you where you do not wish to go" (from John 21:18).



They shall bear fruit even
vigorous and sturdy shall
Declaring how just is the
my Rock, in whom there
Psalm 92:15-16

Although some older priests become disillusioned by retirement from past
G. Heisel — enjoy the freedom from administrative duties.

One reality of retirement much discussed by those involved points to the difficulty of a generation gap between older and younger priests in the same rectory. Interests are understandably different. So are lifestyles, dress, etc.

Conversation in rectories ranges from the modern vernacular of the servant church to topics of times past and the "giants of the old days" unknown to the younger set, leaving little room for common interests.

Historical perspective

No question about it: Vatican II brought divisions into the church that not even John XXIII, who convoked that council, could have anticipated. Of more than 70 retired priests of the Diocese of Rochester, all served the church both before and after Vatican II. Not since the Council of Trent and the Counter-Reformation 400 years ago have the shepherds of the church been called to face so many and such profound changes, in which loyalty to the People of God and the Church of Rome have been so exercised.

"We who stood at the crossroads of church history with loyalty and courage are not at all certain our labors in crisis are acknowledged or remembered," lamented a retired priest. "This is my real hurt at the moment. It engenders a

deep sense of alienation, a lack of for services rendered in most t
Some have shown a rugged, persi
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A priest who this year observed
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the church: "Retirement brings
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church. My career is divided equ
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renewed priestly life to me.

"Would I choose the priestho
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cluded.

Insight

'Insight' author

Both of this month's
Insight features were
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Father Hayes has per-
sonal experience with
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