

Prayer can counter 'quality of life' arguments

By Cardinal John J. O'Connor
Guest contributor

The "quality of life." From all over the country I hear about it and from the far corners of the earth. No one has a right to bring a baby into the world, we are told, if the baby will face poverty, or illness, or retardation, or being unwanted.

No one has the right, we are beginning to hear, to remain alive or to be kept alive if that person will drain society's resources, impose heavy burdens on family members, or never live a "useful" life again.

Today, "quality of life" has come to mean not the improvement of life's conditions, but the condition for life itself — if the quality of one's life is judged to be less than perfect, life itself is said to have no value.

To achieve a higher or better or a different "quality of life:" that was the first temptation to confront the human race. Why has God given you only what he has given you? That was the real question asked Adam and Eve by Satan. Why has God forbidden you to eat the fruit that will raise you to God's own level, given you the authority to determine what is right, what is wrong, who should live, who should die?

I am not speaking in fables. For years of my life I have joined hundreds of thousands in the pro-life movement in persistent efforts to protect the unborn. We have marched and lectured and preached and begged and pleaded. We have appealed to legislators, to political candidates, to courts, to governors and presidents. We will continue to do so, please God, until the very last moment of our lives.

And we will do the same now for the aging, the weak, the cancer-ridden, the handicapped, the retarded. We will do the same for those with tubes in their stomachs and for those in coma and for every other human being whose diminished "quality of life" makes him or her a



Michael Hoy/The Catholic Standard
Prayer is a central theme in this year's Respect Life Program, which begins Sunday, Oct. 6.

candidate for death by benign neglect, or refusal of nutrition and hydration, or "assisted suicide" by lethal injection or drug overdose.

Laws must be changed, and we must persevere passionately to change them. But laws will not change, nor will public policy, until hearts change, until we are converted from our spiritual blindness, "born again" as people. Only if we are born again to new life in the Spirit will the Spirit conceive a new sense of the meaning of life on earth.

The critical need in the pro-life movement today, I believe, is the need for prayer. Only prayer can change the hearts of public officials supportive of abortion and euthanasia. Only prayer can move those passionately committed to a "right to privacy" that excludes all other rights. Only prayer can dissuade some women from

having abortions, some doctors from performing abortions, some families from demanding abortion. Only prayer will stave off the terrifying advance of euthanasia. The entire pro-life movement may have to be "born again" in prayer and in the Holy Spirit if death is to yield again to new life.

Not everyone can march. Not everyone can write a letter, make a phone call, attend a meeting, join in a rally. Everyone can pray. Not everyone can counsel the pregnant, walk a protest line, house a new baby. Everyone can pray. The "helpless" become powerful in prayer. The patient lying in cruciform, spread-eagled in a hospital bed, crisscrossed with wires and tubes, can pray an incredibly powerful prayer by joining such crucifixion with the crucifixion of Christ. The suffering can pray, as can the healthy, the whole, the blind, the lame.

Were I to live 10,000 times 10,000 years, I could not adequately express my admiration for or my gratitude to those organizations and individuals who have given so much, sacrificed so much, struggled so valiantly for the cause of life. I plead with them never to diminish their efforts. But I plead, as well, that all of us committed to life come to recognize the desperate need for prayer.

Until the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles, they were still huddled together in fear, uncertain of their mission, fearful of speaking the truth. Then, suddenly came the strong wind that shook the house, the tongues of fire that touched each heart.

"They were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages," and to be heard by each in his own native language — and, at last, to be understood.

Cardinal O'Connor, archbishop of New York, is chairman of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for Pro-Life Activities.

By Sister Serena Branson
Guest contributor

Monsignor Charles J. Fahey, director of the Third Age Center at Fordham University, notes that "it has never been this way before." The extraordinary increase in life expectancy has ushered in a period of unparalleled well-being for older Americans.

Older people are physically more active and continue to be intellectually engaged. They evince greater interest in continuing employment, volunteer service, and family responsibilities.

Elderly offer gifts to family of faith

Monsignor Fahey popularized the term "Third Age." "With the life span prolonged in this country, the primary roles of work and family are completed with a significant amount of time, often 20 or 30 years, still to be lived," he observed. "We define the remaining phase of a person's life as the 'Third Age,' a time during which healthy persons are blessed with new opportunities for fulfillment in completing the life cycle."

A paradigm is emerging for the Third Age, highlighting new roles and gifts that the elderly can bring to society and to the church. This period of a person's life should be a fruitful time when the individual can witness Christ's love and compassion through a wide array of human services and parish tasks. The church can facilitate these people's efforts to give back to the community what they have received over the years.

Equally important is facilitating the spiritual growth and development of the older person. An enriched interiority will help them to lead more meaningful lives and enable them to contribute to the spiritual growth of others. Hopefully, spiritual leaders in our parishes will enable members of the Third Age to become contemplatives in action, alert to the possibilities of mission and witness, and concerned about the well-being of others.

As neighbors, parishioners or family, we need to discern how we can assist those entering the Third Age to find meaningful challenges. The parish holds most promise as a community of faith in which older people are not only sustained spiritually but also find companionship and opportunities for socializing and continuing growth.

Among the ministerial roles that older people can as-



The Catholic Health Association
Older Americans need ministry from the church, but they also possess many skills and gifts they can offer to their faith communities.

sume are Eucharistic ministers; pastoral care providers; religious or family life education programs; adult education as learners or teachers; members of parish committees; leaders of groups for prayer and Scripture study.

Fortunate are those pastors who tap the potential of retired parishioners who may provide consultation on finances, buildings and grounds and other matters according to their talents and experience. Involving seniors in such ways counteracts ageism and the cultural stereotypes that are so harmful.

Although most older people are capable and self-sustaining, there are exceptions. There are elderly people — many living in their own homes — who need the support of family members, neighbors and community-service organizations. In addition to the elderly living at

home, there are elderly in nursing homes. These elderly people, at home and in institutions, are the challenge for Christians who wish to serve the elderly. These people require parish outreach, assistance with shopping and transportation, Communion in the home, and simply someone to listen.

The aging have emerged as a powerful and effective group in political, social and religious circles. Their future is both awesome and frightening. As Christians, let us be mindful that we can contribute to a future of deeper faith, hope and love for older Americans and that we have the responsibility to do so.

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