

Elderly are a blessing, not a burden

By Monsignor William Shannon
Guest contributor

Synod writing committee No. 4 will be meeting this week to edit the hundreds of parish recommendations dealing with youths, young adults and the elderly.

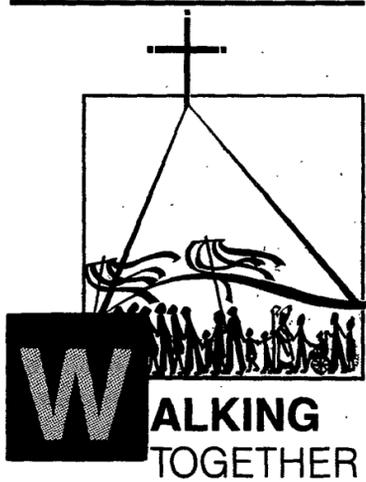
As committee members formulate the final recommendations for consideration at the May 22 Regional Synods, I have only one hope: that nothing they write will glorify youth at the elderly's expense.

For the last several months, I have been editing the fifth and final volume of the Thomas Merton letters. One of the letters I am including in this volume was written to the religious superior of the Little Sisters of the Poor.

Merton writes about the care the sisters give to the elderly: those with whom the world ought to be concerned but whom the world often neglects. He spoke of his conversation with a man from India, who said he was shocked by the way old people in America tend to be set aside and tacitly forgotten.

There is no doubt that we live in a culture that glorifies youth and has little room for the aged. People resist getting old. A multi-billion dollar industry caters to the tastes of people who want to remain youthful looking at all costs.

Indeed, people believe that they are paying a compliment if they praise an older person for looking youthful. Would it maybe be much more appro-



priate and accurate to praise them for the dignity and beauty of their age? Certainly it is fine for some older people to be filled with what seems like the vigor and verve of youth, but that should not be what makes them acceptable to the rest of the world. Merton writes: "Their age itself has a wonderful quality which makes them worthy of special respect and love."

We see beauty in a young face. We have to learn to see a wholly different kind of beauty in an elderly person's face. It is a face in which one can see the light and joy of the mystery of Christ coming to fulfillment. The elderly are not just "specimens" of aging humanity. They are wondrous temples of God, people of unutterable dignity. They are people who have

traveled to eternity's threshold and are waiting to be called into their God's joy.

Recently, one of the priests spoke to me about his visits to the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent Infirmary. "One of the many things that has impressed me about the sisters is the calmness and even the joy with which they accept death. There is no attitude of fear or even sadness. Death comes as a welcome guest," he said.

"Of course," I said. "The people there have achieved a wisdom that not many younger people come to know. They understand what life is about and where it is supposed to lead. Death is not the enemy to be feared. It is the goal to be longed for. It is the fulfillment of life, not its snuffing out. It's the door that leads into new life."

When you stop to think about it, those people who know they are but a few short steps from death are in many ways the most interesting and exciting people on earth: for, as Merton puts it, "they are sitting right in front of a door that may open at any moment" and when that door opens it will reveal what eyes have not seen or heard, or of which humans have even dreamed. How wonderful to be waiting for that.

Actually, we all sit before that door, and it can open at any time for any one of us. But most of us are afraid of its opening and, therefore, we try to forget it's there. Those sisters at the convent infirmary who are dying are sitting before that door, and they just

can't wait till it opens.

As the Mass prayer says: they "wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ." There is really nothing else of interest for them.

Whenever I preside at the funeral of a sister who was rich in years, I find that the gathered community has been jerked into attentiveness. We are called to turn our eyes, for the moment at least, away from the cult of youth, success, power and pleasure. We are invited to look upon the beautiful mystery of age and death. We are invited to see that we, too, stand before the door of mystery that will one day open to us and reveal the things that now remain hidden: the mystery of the joy that surpasses all the joys we now know. This is the joy of being fully possessed by God, the joy of finding ourselves in God.

Our Christian faith urges us to extend our spirits: to go beyond life's superficialities, which so often threaten to engulf us. It calls us to see that the aged among us are not a burden but a blessing. They bring to the Christian community a vision and beauty only they can give. They offer us wondrous examples of faith and hope, as they sit before that door, full of eagerness that it will open to them.

Whatever recommendations our Synod process makes for the elderly, if those recommendations be truly Christian, they will keep this perspective.

Monsignor Shannon is professor emeritus at Nazareth College of Rochester.

The resurrection is our faith's cornerstone

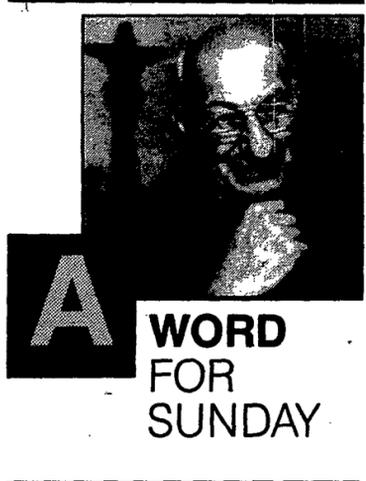
By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:1-9; (R1) Acts 10:34, 37-43; (R2) 1 Corinthians 3:1-4.

We know of the tradition that the lily sprang from Eve's repentant tears as she went forth from paradise. Whether that be so or not, the lily is the flower of Easter. The trumpet-shaped lilies joyfully announce the resurrection, paradise regained. The bell-shaped lilies ring out the good news of Jesus' victory over sin and death. It is fitting then that lilies are Easter's flowers.

Our faith's cornerstone is the resurrection. As St. Paul put it, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17).

But He has been raised. That was the *kerygma*, the early church's basic proclamation. Peter's sermons in Acts are simply samples of the *kerygma*. Essentially, it was this: Israel rejected the salvation proffered by Jesus, but His resurrection from the dead was a vindication of all He had stood for — it was God's seal of approval on all that He had said and done in His



earthly ministry. And we, the apostles, have been eyewitnesses of all He had said and done, from His baptism by John to His resurrection appearances to us.

Jesus' resurrection does not mean that His earthly ministry is over and done. Rather, it means that all He said and did now continues on in the church.

Thus, St. Paul tells us in the second

reading that the resurrection has to be implemented by our constant moral efforts: by our setting our hearts on what pertains to higher realms whither Christ has arisen, and by being sincere and truthful.

Before celebrating Passover, a Jewish housewife had to make sure the house was swept clean of all leavened bread. So Paul urges us to make a similar housecleaning: to purge ourselves of corruption and wickedness so we can celebrate the sacrifice of the true paschal lamb with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Resurrection, therefore, is something present. It consists in our raising ourselves to the things above.

Let us go back to our Easter lilies. Generally the pot is wrapped in silver paper. Inside the pot is some plain black dirt. Deep in that dirt is the lily bulb, which looks like an onion. It lives down there in darkness, and — with a little water each day — it keeps the lily alive.

Then there is the tall, green stalk, with bright green leaves, holding the lilies high. The lilies, we might say, have two worlds: the world of the bulb in the dark, dank earth, and the world of the lily flaring out in beauty

and freshness in the upper air.

So do we live in two worlds: the world of the body and the world of the spirit. The body needs to be cared for, fed and clothed. Because a healthy body is so important, we tend to spend a lot of time on physical things. But the spirit's world is more important. As the bulb is to the lily, so the body is to the soul.

Resurrection means to rise up from the things of the earth, to focus more on the spiritual than the bodily; to live in the beautiful realm of the spirit; to think like God; to love like God; to radiate the beauty, the loveliness and the sweet aroma of a life lived for God.

Our resurrection in life can come in totally unexpected ways. It came to St. Francis of Assisi while in prison; to St. Alphonsus in a courtroom; to Teresa of Calcutta while riding in a train.

It can come to a married couple sometimes only after years of fidelity and pain. It can come to another person after a long illness or the premature death of someone dearly loved. It can come to anyone who has faith — a faith that knows and believes Good Friday is not the end of life, but the path to Easter, to resurrection to a new and better life.

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