

Clergy take part in brain tests

By Jay Copp
Catholic News Service

TECHNY, Ill. — Divine Word Father Louis Luzbetak, 76, will not let old age — or even death — get in the way of his commitment to service.

He is one of 448 priests, sisters and brothers who are part of a research project on Alzheimer's disease and other chronic neurological conditions. Doctors and nurses from Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center are in their second year of annual tests on the volunteers.

The volunteers, who are not suffering from Alzheimer's, undergo tests for memory, language and motor skills. Upon death, their brains are removed for study.

"The basic idea of Christianity is love of God and fellow man. This is a wonderful way to give something back to him and to your fellow man," Father Luzbetak recently told *The New World*, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

The religious and clergy were recruited for the study after Rush officials found no takers among the general population. Lay elderly don't mind submitting to the tests while alive but draw the line at donating their brains, said project director Dr. David Bennett.

Religious don't shudder at the thought of their own mortality, the volunteers agreed. Many of them have seen one of their members suffer the debilitating effects of Alzheimer's.

Participating are 26 Chicago archdiocesan priests, plus Augustinians, Benedictines, Christian Brothers, Domini-

cans, Franciscans, Passionists and Servites.

Women's religious orders taking part include the St. Joseph, Mercy, Holy Spirit, St. Casimir and Holy Family sisters as well as Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The volunteers, all age 65 or older, are put through a mentally rigorous series of tests. They are asked to recall details of stories and lists of unrelated words. They are also analyzed on motor functions like walking and getting up from a chair.

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Father Luzbetak, scholar

Nine volunteers already have died and undergone autopsies. Rush has staff on call 24 hours a day in various cities to quickly remove their brains upon death.

While lay people have declined to take part because of objections from family members, support for the project in the religious communities is strong.

"I can see where people have a problem with their families. We're in a family where it's accepted," said Divine Word Father Edward Norton, 76, a former missionary in

China and the Philippines.

Volunteers said the only drawback to the study is the strain of the tests. They also suffer from some good-natured ribbing.

"We had our picture in the paper last year," said Divine Word Father Frederick Rudolph, 67, a former vocation director and educator. "A friend said, 'I didn't know so many SVDs had Alzheimer's. I didn't know you had it.'"

Bennett, a non-Catholic, said the eager participation of religious, who have a long history of volunteering for medical research, impressed him.

"The church gets a lot of bad press," he said. "For every guy that makes the front page there are hundreds who are altruistic without giving it a second thought."

Funded by the National Institute on Aging, the study is expected to yield some findings in about five years. The study may also help people better understand Parkinson's disease and strokes.

A similar study involving religious but more focused on physical functions is under way in Kentucky.

Father Luzbetak, a scholar, said that as a priest-anthropologist he views science as an ally.

"We live in a scientific period," he said. "We have to use all our strength — including our scientific strength — in love for our fellow man."

He added, "God gave me everything I have. The least I can give him is a piece of my lousy brain."

Joked Bennett, "We understand it's a very good brain. We haven't checked it yet, though."

Catholic groups produce manual for older adult parish ministry

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (CNS) — A coalition of more than 20 groups has produced a resource manual to help parishes and dioceses tackle issues affecting older adults and their families.

The manual, titled "A Collaborative Project to Support Older Adult Ministry," also contains tools to help dioceses conduct programs on spirituality and aging and develop new services or volunteer programs.

The binder full of materials was published by Catholic Charities USA and developed by the National Catholic Convening on Aging, which includes such groups as the Catholic Health Association, the National Council of Catholic Women, Catholic Golden Age and several others.

"This tool can help local and diocesan church officials to assess how to respond best to an aging church and society," said Jane Stenson, program director for community services for Catholic Charities USA.

"Our communities could reap the benefits of the many talents that older adults possess," she added. "In addition, the growing number of elderly people may indicate the need for new or more targeted programs for them."

EDITORS' NOTE: The resource manual, mailed free to each U.S. bishop and to diocesan aging representatives, is available to others for \$25 from Jane Stenson, Catholic Charities USA, 1731 King St., No. 200, Alexandria, Va. 22314.

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LOW VISION PRACTICE
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O.D., F.A.A.O.
Optometrist

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