

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Vatican: Value the gifts seniors have to share

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — The 1999 celebration of the International Year of Older Persons should find Catholics making a new commitment not only to care for the elderly, but to learn from them, a Vatican document said.

"The elderly are bearers of religious and moral values which represent a rich spiritual patrimony for the life of Christian communities, families and the world," said the statement from the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

The council, headed by U.S. Cardinal J. Francis Stafford, said the growing number of people over 70 in the world and the spread of a culture that seems to appreciate only productivity call for church action.

The United Nations has declared 1999 a year for honoring the elderly and for working to improve their living situations.

"A society which bases everything on efficiency and the glossy image of eternal youth excludes from its relational networks those who no longer have such prerequisites," said the Vatican document, released in Italian in early December.

As people age and their mobility becomes more restricted, they are pushed to the margins of society, and little attention is paid to their physical, spiritual and intellectual needs, it said.

Many people forget how much older people still have to offer their families, parishes and communities, the council document said.

"An extraordinary example of this truth comes to us from John Paul II, who also in this area is a great witness for people today," it said.

"The pope lives his old age with extreme naturalness. Far from hiding it, he places it under the eyes of all — who hasn't seen him joking with his cane?" the document said.

"His 78 years have not deprived him of a youthful spirit," it said. "His undeniable physical frailty has not undermined the enthusiasm with which he dedicates himself to his mission as successor of Peter.

"It is surprising to note how his words acquire increasing strength and how they reach the heart of people more than ever," the document said.

But too often, the Vatican said, the elderly are pushed out of church and social life and are shown little respect.

"The most dramatic dimension of this marginalization is the lack of human relationships," which also lead to a lack of affection, stimulation and information.

Within the church, the document called for a revision of pastoral programs for the "young old" — those from 65 to 75 years old — and the "oldest old" — those over 75.

"The search for new forms and meth-



File photo

Mary Schleg, right, helps Doris Sindoni with her grocery shopping after Mass at St. James Church, Waverly, in February 1997. The Vatican said in a recent statement that the church and society must keep in mind that seniors have many gifts they can share.

ods, corresponding more to their needs and spiritual expectations, the elaboration of pastoral plans rooted in the defense of life, its meaning and its destiny," are essential for helping the elderly make their continuing contribution to the church and for helping them face the future with hope, it said.

"Far from being passive subjects of the church's pastoral care, the elderly are apostles without substitutes, especially among their peers, because no one knows better than they do the problems and sensitivities of this phase of human life," the document said.

The elderly have a right to ongoing faith formation, to help them in their mission of sharing the Gospel as well as to help them face the new challenges that aging brings, it said.

"With their words and prayers, but also with what they give up and with the sufferings advanced age brings, the elderly always have been and continue to be eloquent witnesses and communicators of faith in Christian communities and in families," it said.

The Vatican document paid particular tribute to the "babushkas" — the grandmothers in Russia and other formerly communist countries — "who were able to keep the Christian faith alive and transmit it to their grandchildren" when

expressions of faith were considered a crime.

"It is thanks to their courage that in the former communist countries the faith did not disappear completely," the document said.

The Vatican encouraged every diocese


to set up an office for the pastoral care of older persons, to support them in their struggle to secure adequate health care and housing, and to remove all prejudicial and architectural barriers that prevent their full participation in church life.

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Thoughts to Consider



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A child may be quite upset when a pet dies. One way you can help is to plan a ceremony with the child for saying goodbye. A pet funeral gives the child a feeling of being in control and allows him to express some feeling about the loss. Finding a box to place the pet in, digging a grave, and holding a ceremony also satisfies a child's natural curiosity about the physical aspects of death.

When a pet dies a child may continue to be sad for several days then, as a rule, they turn their attention to other matters. Listen to your child when he expresses his feelings and be available to answer any questions your child might have.

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