

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Ignore media stereotypes, visiting priest says

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT — People in the United States have lost sight of the great gift to be found in growing old, Father Hugh Burns, OP, said.

"We treat old age as if it were something to be ashamed of, as if it was something to be hidden or denied," he told more than 100 people at St. James Church Sept. 29.

The message society sends the elderly is threefold, the traveling Dominican preacher said: "Hit that golf ball; do your mall walk in the morning; and button your lip."

Father Burns, who hails from Jersey City, N.J., visited the parish to preach a mission titled "Heart-to-Heart." In addition to celebrating daily Masses, the priest gave morning and evening talks on such subjects as aging, forgiveness, suffering and religion.

Known as the "Preaching Kojak" because his bald dome echoes that of the famed 1970s TV cop, Father Burns is a former Boston politico who left politics for the priesthood and was ordained in 1982. During his Sept. 29 presentation, he walked back and forth in front of his mostly gray-haired audience, preaching the gospel of growing-old-gracefully, with humor and exuberant gestures.

It's no surprise that old age has such a bad rap in U.S. culture, the priest said, because the mass media promote the idea that being young is the only way to be. In fact, most commercials that cater to the elderly only highlight the fact that being old means being sickly, he noted. He pointed out that senior faces only show up on television when they're promoting such products as the anti-impotence drug



Mike Mergen/Photo Intern

Father Hugh Burns, OP, speaks with Marion Apetz before delivering his morning talk Sept. 29 at St. James Church, Irondequoit. The New Jersey priest visited St. James to preach about aging for its "Heart-to-Heart" parish mission.

Viagra or various denture pastes.

"On TV, everyone is young and glamorous," he said, adding that actors in commercials particularly promote unrealistic images of people.

"It's always someone with a body even God couldn't create," he said of such actors.

Contrary to TV's encouragement to hide one's age, Father Burns urged his audience to be proud of their years.

"Why cover up those gray hairs?" he asked rhetorically. "You earned them ... Every one of those wrinkles has got some kid's name attached to it."

Living to an old age is a testament to one's strength, Father Burns said. Senior citizens have often triumphed over such

challenges as divorce and alcoholism, he said.

"Growing old ain't no day at the beach," he said. "It takes guts ... Most of you are survivors. You survived life. If they had told you at 17 years that you would go through the things you have gone through, would you have had the guts to go through them?"

Old age also brings insight, he said.

"The most important growth in human

life goes on inside," he said. "It's a growth called wisdom, and it's not associated with younger people."

Part of that wisdom comes from replacing the fear of God with the love of God, he said.

"The older we get, the more comfortable we should get with God," Father Burns said. "God should be like that really old bathrobe that you just love."

That doesn't mean that old people should go around wearing old bathrobes all the time, he stressed, urging his audience members to take care of themselves and their appearance.

"The older we get, the more important it is to get up and look nice," he said. "It's a respect we pay to ourselves."

The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, according to Scripture, and should be treated as such, he said.

"The Holy Spirit isn't going to want to go flopping around in an old house dress all day long," he said. "Gussy him up."

Finally, he said, the elderly should remember that young people and middle-aged people do need the old, even if seniors don't always feel that way.

"A lot of life is just hanging on, and we need you to show us how to do it," he said.

He added that focusing on one's faith can help an older person age with dignity and grace.

"It is true that with the Holy Spirit at the center of our hearts, we're not getting older, we're getting better," he said.

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