

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Population surge of elders challenges society

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — A growing population of senior citizens presents ethical challenges to a society that is still not ready to accommodate them, said Msgr. Charles J. Fahey, 67, a nationally recognized expert on aging.

"There's always been old people, but the old have always been an exception," Msgr. Fahey told an audience of 50 people at St. Ann's Chapel, located at St. Ann's Community, a retirement and health-care facility that serves the elderly.

Prior to the 1950s, society did not have to reckon with such large numbers of old people, he said. But according to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2030, there will be more than 60 million U.S. citizens age 65 and older, double the number in 1990.

Everything from how society rations health care for its citizens to how retired people should spend their lives is under question now because there are so many seniors, the monsignor said.

The question facing society now, he said, is "How can (retirement) be a satisfying period for the individual, not just misery, and for society as well?"

"Ethics and Aging" was the title of the talk given by the priest, who serves as the Marie Ward Doty Professor of Aging Studies at the Third Age Center in New York City's Fordham University, a Jesuit school. Msgr. Fahey, a St. Bernard's Seminary graduate and a priest of the Diocese of Syracuse, has been frequently consulted by the federal government on aging issues.

Msgr. Fahey asked far more questions than he answered in his talk, outlining several issues that occupy the attention of ethicists and aging experts.

He began by pointing out that in Jesus' time, few people lived past the age of 50, and that even up until the middle of this century, many humans lived a life cycle more like that of animals, living just long enough to raise their own children. However, childhood immunizations, improved sanitation and nutrition, and other improvements have eradicated or lessened the impact of many once-deadly diseases, he said.

But longer life-spans for more people have come with a price, the priest said. He noted, for example, that the increasing costs of prescription drugs many seniors use drive up health-care insurance premiums for everyone. On the other hand, he asked, seniors are often the same people who built and improved society during their productive years, so are they not entitled to benefit from the health and social service system that they helped to create?

At the same time that more and more seniors are needing health and social services, fewer people want to pay the taxes or private funds necessary to support them, he added. Part of this trend is due to the fact that more and more citizens value individualism and autonomy over any sense of the common good, he added. However, such an attitude ignores the fact that none of us makes ourselves alone.

"Each of us is socially constructed, as well as the result of individual choices we



Mike Mergen/Photo intern

Msgr. Charles J. Fahey addresses employees of St. Ann's Home Dec. 2, prior to a public talk. Msgr. Fahey addressed issues such as ethics, aging and current events.

make," he said, pointing out that he benefited in his own life from the suffering and sacrifices of his Irish Catholic ancestors.

One reason that society can't come to a consensus about what exactly is the "common good," he said, is because even ethicists no longer agree about what is "good."

For example, he said, many secular ethicists with whom he works are uncomfortable calling any decision a person or society makes right or wrong. Unlike secular ethicists, Catholic ethicists come from a tradition that states that moral laws are as discernible as physical laws, and that people have "unalienable" rights — to life, for example — that can never be

violated.

Their moral tradition challenges Catholics to grapple with moral questions brought about by their increasing life-spans, he said. For example, although many people retire at 65, he asked whether that meant they no longer had any obligations to society. To illustrate his point, he noted that in the 25th chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus stated people would be judged by how they fed him, clothed him and took care of him "in the least of my brothers" — and the Lord didn't mention a retirement age.

"Is it my right to take a pension ... and play golf?" Msgr. Fahey asked of retirees. "(Or) do I have a new role to play in life that is beyond what I've played before?"

Joint Commission grants St. Ann's national accreditation

St. Ann's Community, Rochester, has achieved accreditation from the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations.

The accreditation came after an on-site review in September and was announced in November.

"Accreditation standards exceed federal and state requirements," stated Marianna Kern Gracheck, executive di-

rector, Long Term Care Program, Joint Commission.

"Further, because this is a voluntary program, accreditation represents St. Ann's Community's decision to be recognized for its efforts to provide quality care," she stated.

About 2,000 long-term care organizations have such accreditation, she added.

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