

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Delegates look forward to Vatican Jubilee event

By Nancy Hartnagel
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — U.S. delegates to the Vatican's Jubilee for Older Persons say they're honored to be chosen and delighted to be going to Rome in September.

But the best part of this jubilee celebration — set for Sept. 16-17 — is what it could do for senior citizens worldwide, the delegates said in phone interviews with Catholic News Service.

Msgr. Charles J. Fahey, senior associate and former director of the Third Age Center at Fordham University in New York, has labored in the field of gerontology for 40 years.

"For a lot of those years, I've been kind of a voice in the wilderness," he said. "So it's a thrill to see a much deeper engagement."

The most significant thing that could come of this gathering, he said, would be for countries where people are struggling to do something for the elderly — but without much support — to experience the event as "indicative of the church's support of what they're doing."

Virginia Knight-Simon is coordinator of what has come to be known as "the wisdom program," a ministry to senior citizens by the Diocese of Owensboro, Ky.

Said Knight-Simon: "If I can pick up any ideas or information that another country or another person is doing in their program, that I can come back and implement here, or vice versa, I think it will be really uplifting."

Also, she said, "to be able to come back and tell the senior citizens here how much value the pope puts on them, that in it-

self is really important."

Mercy Sister M. Karen McNally is chief administrative officer of Stella Maris, an Archdiocese of Baltimore facility that provides a continuum of services for some 2,300 elderly people each year.

She said it's "absolutely wonderful that the elderly are being recognized in such a significant way, of having their own day, their own congress, and that the church is recognizing them as such a valuable part of the Christian community."

These three, along with K. LaVerne Redden, president of the National Council of Catholic Women, were chosen in May to represent U.S. Catholics at the Jubilee for Older Persons, sponsored by the Pontifical Council for the Laity. CNS was unable to speak with Redden, who was caring for a sick relative.

The U.S. delegates will participate with other national delegations in a Sept. 16 congress on "The Gift of Long Life: Responsibility and Hope." The next day, Pope John Paul II will celebrate Mass in St. Peter's Square.

Msgr. Fahey, also the Marie Ward Doty professor of aging studies at Fordham, will give one of three lectures at the congress. His topic is "Charisms of the Evening of Life."

One theme he will stress throughout, he said, is "setting relationships aright, which is part of the historic jubilee concept in the Book of Leviticus."

He plans to focus on three areas, he said — the interior life, both psychological and spiritual; the importance of social interactions; and the impact of older people as a group on all society.

Knight-Simon, who started the Owensboro program five years ago with just her



Reuters/CNS

A crowd packs St. Peter's Square Jan. 2 for the first of many special jubilee celebrations put on by the Vatican. There were estimates that millions of pilgrims had already passed through the open Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica.

"gift of gab," said the work has been very rewarding. Many of the 80-year-old homebound seniors she visits or interviews for profiles in the diocesan newspaper can't believe anyone is interested in talking to them, she said.

"They are history," she said. "You want to keep your history alive and share it."

Knight-Simon said the program has drawn inquiries from Canadian and British dioceses, as well as a number closer to home.

In preparation for her trip, Sister Karen said she gathered a group of nursing home patients at Stella Maris and asked them, "What does it mean to you to be a member of a Christian community and what do you expect?"

According to the nun, who has degrees in nursing and administration, "the first thing they mentioned was not to be forgotten."

They said they'd been a vital part of

parishes and the church and society, and even though they were well-cared-for spiritually at Stella Maris, they didn't want those other groups to forget them, she recalled.

"That said a lot," Sister Karen added. "We get busy and we forget."

Though it's mainly a business trip for these experts on senior issues, they will take some time for themselves. As Msgr. Fahey observed, "It's always nice to visit Rome," and two of the delegates will be seeing it for the first time.

Knight-Simon, who got married in February, said she and her husband plan "to stay on awhile" for a little honeymoon.

And Sister Karen will spend five days in Rome, then journey to Assisi, Venice and Florence.

"The residents here at Stella Maris told me absolutely to be sure to see the four major basilicas," she said with a laugh.

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