

Pastoral Letter on Aging

*Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long
in the land the Lord your God is giving you.¹*

(Exodus 20: 12)

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

These beautiful words from the book of Exodus provide a solid foundation for the message I want to share with you about aging and care for the aging. I write this pastoral letter to offer some reflections on the gift of living a long life. In addition, I also want to call on the Catholic community to boldly address the challenges we face in terms of care for the aging. I write to help make the Catholic community aware that changes which are on the horizon will require a new level of response and a new commitment to action. I am confident that we can and will be successful in meeting these challenges, because we are a community of believers who value the dignity of life in all its stages.

Toward that end, I am pleased to announce that the Archdiocese is collaborating with several Catholic nonprofit senior care organizations to establish a new system, Catholic Senior Services. This new network will be an umbrella organization that brings existing Catholic organizations together. It will help meet the escalating needs of older adults and establish a coordinated, comprehensive approach to senior services.

This planned network will offer families integrated senior housing and care services, spiritual support, and educational and socialization opportunities for elders throughout the Archdiocese. This networked system also will coordinate referrals and efficiently bring together resources for families in the Archdiocese. This Catholic system will increase opportunities for elders to stay connected to their church and their neighborhood.

In this letter I want to discuss the important changes and challenges that lie ahead. However, before I do that, allow me to share some reflections on aging. Personally, I am blessed to have lived quite a long life and to experience relatively good health. This is tremendous gift for which I thank God every day. I am grateful for this gift, because each day brings new opportunities – opportunities to show my love for others and to receive their love in return, opportunities to contribute through my work as an archbishop to build a strong and vibrant faith community,

opportunities to help in my own small way to bring about the reign of God on this earth through works of charity and justice.

In each of these ways, I am able to preach God's word and to actually encounter God. As Pope Benedict XVI said so eloquently in his first encyclical letter, "love of neighbor is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and closing our eyes to our neighbor blinds us to God."² So I deeply treasure each day, for each new day is an opportunity to encounter God. What better reason could there be for me to treasure a long life?

As each of us grows older, the aging process brings with it many changes. While physical and cognitive challenges come our way, there are also tremendous opportunities in our later years to enrich our lives, and to sharpen our awareness of God's presence. Spirituality often becomes more important to us as we reach out to God and strive to deepen our relationship with the Creator. We are drawn to God with a sense of gratitude for all that we have received. We feel a desire to share God's love by loving others. We do this by how we share our gifts with our family and friends, by how we serve the community, and by how we live active and vibrant lives.

One set of images that I think beautifully describes the process of aging is that of the "seasons of life." In this imagery, each season of life offers its own special beauties that God has given us to enjoy. With spring comes the freshness of new life and the eager reach toward early adulthood. We learn, grow and prepare for the future, with all its' joys and wonders, as well as its' pains and tears. In the summer of life we assume the mantle of responsibilities for career, marriage and family. We find satisfaction in the creativity of our work and in being surrounded by our family. We share our gifts and contribute to society through accomplishments that reach far beyond our own lives.

During autumn, the days grow shorter and the world takes on more vibrant hues that offer a special beauty not apparent during summer. It is a time to enjoy the fruits of our labors and prepare for the coming winter. As winter arrives, the light softens and our energy is diminished. We assume an easier pace, enjoying the time with family, friends, and new opportunities for learning. It is a time for reflection and review. As winter unfolds, our bodies lose strength, and we are unable to live as independently as we once did. We may need more care, and we may struggle with loneliness and isolation.

Yet, winter can also be a wonderful season of peaceful contentment and reflection. Winter can be an opportunity for renewal of the mind, body and spirit. In this season, we often develop a more

reflective spirituality. We look back over our lives; we think about death and dying; and we become more acutely aware of the promise of the Resurrection. We long to be released into the next life and to be truly in God's presence. This spiritual quest is an important part of our final season of life.

Signs of Change

In this current phase of life change we find that our society is also changing rapidly. It is important that we understand these changes and respond to them with love, caring, and justice. For the first time in the history of our nation, the largest generation – that of the baby boomers – is entering the autumn of life. This aging of the baby boom generation is likely to impact every aspect of modern life.

Let us examine the specifics of this coming demographic change . We begin with the simple fact that the first members of the massive, 78 million-strong, baby boom generation are retiring. This has been called the *age wave*, and it is unprecedented in modern history.

In Minnesota, 1.4 million baby boomers are coming of age as part of this population shift. By 2030, one in four Minnesotans will be age 65 or older, double the current number. We can expect triple the number of people over age 85, including the number of centenarians.³ In the years ahead, it will not be unusual to have five or six generations represented in many Minnesota households.

Many members of today's aging population are better-educated, more technologically adept and living healthier lifestyles in later years. However, other members of the generation are ill-prepared for the looming changes. An estimated one-third of baby boom seniors will not have adequate financial resources for retirement. Another third will be living in poverty.⁴ At least half of all Twin Cities senior households will not be able to afford the housing they require.⁵

Across Minnesota, we also can expect a 200 percent increase in the number of older adults with chronic health conditions.⁶ More elders will require some assistance with daily living activities. These trends make it likely that there will be a wide gap between elders with adequate financial means and those without.

While these external demographic changes will affect the level of need that we will experience in terms of care for older adults, another significant demographic change is occurring within the Catholic Church itself, specifically within the religious orders of women. The work that these women have done for many years in caring for the elderly has been exemplary. With compassion and true dedication, Sisters from many different orders have ministered to our older adults in a way that has been truly exceptional and valuable. While we give thanks and blessings for their great work, we also realize that the numbers of women religious has declined dramatically, and there will be far fewer women religious to offer care in the future. Therefore, as a faith community, we need many new lay leaders to carry on this work and to expand it, so that we can meet the growing needs the future will bring.

Signs of Hope

Thankfully, there is emerging in our culture a new knowledge about the aging process and a new awareness that growing old can offer many positive experiences. Attitudes and understanding about aging have started to change, and the presence of ageism in our society has begun to dim. Since the 1970s, a relatively new field of endeavor – gerontology – has offered some real hope. This body of knowledge is proving that the body and mind need not fall apart like an old, rusting automobile with too many miles on it. Research is demonstrating that the later years can truly be a golden age, a more fulfilling time to grow old. No longer must our beloved older adults go home, sit, and wait to die.

In recent decades, science has produced dramatic positive changes. A wide range of medical advances and medical care improvements have extended longevity. For example, scientists tell us that the brain is far more agile and adaptable than we previously thought. They are finding just how renewable the human mind and body can be as we age. Elders can actually reignite their aging minds by exercising their mental skills and continuing to be active.⁷

Catholic Social Values

Faced with the inevitable changes and challenges before us, I believe it is important that we reflect on the Scriptures and the rich tradition of Catholic social teaching to guide us in shaping a loving and just response to them.

The Scriptures tell us to “honor your father and your mother.” In this context the word *honor* has a rich and varied meaning. In the Biblical texts it refers to positive, helpful actions that bring joy to our parents’ lives. It means an attitude of respect for parents and their shared position in the family. We are to honor them in a way that acknowledges their inherent dignity as creatures made in God’s image and as uniquely valuable members of the human community.

The Scriptures instruct us to follow the Golden Rule -- “Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.” (Mt. 7:12) Even more forceful are the words of Jesus in the parable about the Last Judgment, when he explains what the just and righteous people said:

*“When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?
When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?”
And the king will say to them in reply, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for
one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Mt. 25)*

Equally important is the unmistakable message about justice that we find in early biblical texts such as Exodus and Deuteronomy, and in the books of the Prophets. We learn that a basic test of whether or not justice was truly present in the community was whether the “widows, orphans, and strangers” were being cared for. This phrase stood for the poor, the forgotten, the weakest members of the community. If they were not cared for, then justice was not present, and God’s relationship with the people was fractured.

We can draw from these Scriptural passages some important moral lessons about how we should treat those who are aging – both in terms of our individual actions, but also in terms of our organizational responses and the public policies we support. People who are aging, especially the poor among them, are likely to be the “widows, orphans, and strangers” of our time. They deserve to be treated with respect and to be full members of the community. If we fail to treat them lovingly and justly, then we risk not only the individual moral condemnation that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 25, but also the rupture of the community, the breakdown of our communal relationship with God.

The rich tradition of Catholic social teaching echoes these moral themes. This teaching is embodied in papal writings and other official church documents during the last century and a half. The very foundations of this teaching are the principles of human dignity and community. We are taught that all human beings are endowed with a special dignity, because they are made in the image and likeness of God. Moreover, this dignity is protected by certain basic human rights. Among these rights is the right to the basic necessities of life – such as food, shelter, health care,

social insurance(what is “social insurance”?) – as well as the right to receive adequate social services and to participate in decisions that affect one’s own life.

The Church’s teaching makes it clear that these rights are not to be treated in a purely individualistic sense. Rather, they are rights held in community. Thus, for example, all members of the elderly population have a right to adequate health care and housing, but these rights carry with them a corresponding set of responsibilities for the community. For every right that the elder population has, there is a corresponding responsibility on the part of the family, the community, and if necessary, the government, to ensure that this right is protected.

In his encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI summed up this dimension of Catholic teaching very concisely when he spoke about poverty. He declared that “within the community of believers, there can never be room for a poverty that denies anyone what is needed for a dignified life.”⁸ The Pope made another very important point when he wrote about “organized love.” He said, “As a community, the Church must practice love. Love, thus, needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community.”⁹

One final note that I would like to make regarding Catholic values has to do with the ethical choices that often have to be made when one is severely ill or in the process of dying. With the advance of medical technology come new ethical dilemmas and challenges. These new technologies can often be a blessing, because they can enable people to enjoy fulfilling lives for a longer time. However, they can also lead to difficult ethical choices about life and the dying process. These issues are addressed in comprehensive way in a document issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishop and entitled “Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services.” These topics are also the subject of ongoing discussions at the Vatican.

I call attention to these resources, because they demonstrate clearly that the Church as a whole, as well as Catholic organizations that serve seniors, are guided by ethical principles that respect the value of human life and guard the rights of those who are sick and dying. The guidelines in the Bishops’ document help ensure the care is provided in Catholic institutions encompasses not only the treatment of physical illness or ailments, but also the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the human person.

Spiritual care is often more important and more sought after in times of illness, and addressing these spiritual needs is an integral part of Catholic health care. The spiritual care that needs to be offered includes such services as “a listening presence; help in dealing with powerlessness, pain,

and alienation; and assistance in recognizing and responding to God's will with greater joy and peace."¹⁰ As the Bishops' document says so clearly, "The Catholic health care ministry faces the reality of death with the confidence of faith. In the face of death—for many, a time when hope seems lost—the Church witnesses to her belief that God has created each person for eternal life."¹¹

Responding to the Challenge

The future offers great promise that elders will be able to live longer and to live vital and dignified lives. However, this promise will not be fulfilled unless our community is well-prepared for the large demographic shift that is coming. This shift will place unprecedented pressures on social systems and care providers, as well as on our parishes, and families.

We already know there will be significant new demands for care and services in the decades ahead. The coming historic generational shift forces us to look at the future in new ways. For example, how will we fund the care and services that will be needed? How will we ensure quality in those services?

Our task as a community of faith is to respond to these challenges in a way that is grounded in our faith and in the values that we draw from Scriptures and Catholic social teaching. Most importantly, we are guided by the principles of human dignity and community. If we are committed to these moral values, then we must be committed to ensuring that our elders are provided with high-quality care, in communities that are inviting and life-giving. These communities should strive to help all members reach their fullest human potential as creatures made in God's image. In short, we must do all we can to help our elders enjoy fulfilling lives surrounded by faith, family and community.

We also need to enhance the scope of community support for elders. This includes providing care that is accessible to every senior and meets their special needs, regardless of financial means. It also includes providing a social network that offers fulfilling living experiences and keeps elders at the center of intergenerational community life.

As a foundation for our overall approach to the changing needs of seniors, I believe it is important to help aging adults rediscover their strengths, interests and goals. This means helping seniors to look beyond the inevitable aches and pains, the infirmities of aging, and to focus on creating a life that is enriching and fulfilling. Rather than having seniors spend much of their time addressing

physical deficits and worrying about their problems, let us help them live vital lives by emphasizing their individual talents, dreams and goals.

One of the most important aspects of meeting the needs of the aging is the availability of a comprehensive continuum of care that can respond to the varied and changing needs of individuals as they grow older. This is especially important as people become frail and their physical condition requires different levels of care and support over time. A continuum of care that provides a variety of care options and a smooth transition from one level to the next makes it possible for aging individuals to maintain the maximum amount of freedom and control that is possible and practical for them as their physical condition changes.

When our older community members require the services of a care facility, it is important that the model of care moves beyond the mere treatment of symptoms and celebrates strengths and abilities. It should see beyond the 20 percent disability to the 80 percent ability that the person can still enjoy. This outlook significantly contributes to a heightened quality of life for elders. By putting the older adult at the very center of care, the physician, nurses nursing assistants, physical and occupational therapists, and social workers – in partnership with family and friends – help these older adults find a healthy lifestyle that's right for them, a lifestyle that will keep them engaged and interested.

For seniors, the spiritual dimension of life is as essential as the physical, social and psychological dimensions. Therefore, in caring for seniors, whether in a Catholic care facility or in the parish setting, it is important to remember that seniors often feel the need for greater spiritual care and guidance as they grow older. We must ensure that our Catholic institutions have the capacity to respond to these spiritual needs so that spiritual care is provided as an integral part of their overall care. We must also provide the opportunity for them, at the end of their lives, to experience the process of death and dying in a respectful way and with the level of pastoral and spiritual care they desire.

“This Place is Heaven”

One story beautifully represents these care ideals at work. in our community. In 2003, Lorraine was living in Nevada and waiting to die. Then, after moving to a respected Twin Cities senior care campus, something remarkable happened. She was renewed — by faith, love, friendship, and a rich, interesting life.

Lorraine lived in Las Vegas for a decade, suffering poor health. Depressed, she moved into a group home, gave away her furniture, and lost her zest for living. She ate off paper plates, did not regularly worship, and failed to get involved in any engaging activities. She was alone and lonely. “I was going to die. I figured I’d live for six months, no more,” she explained. “In hindsight, I think I was dying of loneliness,” she said.

Then, a tipping point that changed everything. A social worker suggested Lorraine could do something about her loneliness. They identified a Minneapolis senior residence that had everything she wanted, and it was close to her family. Lorraine moved with few possessions into her new senior apartment, figuring death would come shortly.

Then, something remarkable happened – Lorraine began to blossom. She started thinking about living instead of dying. Her family visited frequently. She worshipped regularly and received Holy Communion. Lorraine made many new friends and participated in engaging activities. She became a patient of a gerontology physician who made house calls. All of this helped Lorraine feel much better. “I was reborn, renewed again,” Lorraine explained tearfully, still amazed at her transformation. “I feel 200 percent better.”

Lorraine was unstoppable. She signed up for knitting and ceramics classes, rediscovered her talent for painting, attended bible study, and even mastered a photography class after purchasing a high-tech, digital camera and figuring out how to use it. “I photographed every staff member and resident and gave them their photos as gifts,” Lorraine said. In time, an exhibit of her work hung in the senior residence’s art gallery for all to enjoy.

Lorraine expressed sincere gratitude for her renewal, made possible by quality senior housing and loving care. “I love it here,” she told her family and friends. “I thought you had to die to get to Heaven. It’s right here.”

Lorraine’s final months of earthly life came to a peaceful end in 2006. Lorraine’s son said the last years of her life was a fulfilling, happy time for his mother. “This was the best place my mother ever lived in the 84 years of her life.” Lorraine’s renewal can be a guiding light for all of us. What promise, what hope.

To meet the growing needs of senior adults, we will need commitment and action at several different levels. Allow me to suggest some action steps that might be possible at each of these levels:

Individuals. Each of you can help respond to the future challenges through your own actions. You can assist your own family members who are elderly by inviting and encouraging them to remain active and involved in the community. If you have family members or relatives who are frail or ill, you can provide care for them yourself, or you can work to ensure that the care they receive from others is of high quality and respectful of their wishes. You can also make a commitment to learn more about the coming demographic changes and what they will mean for your family and for our society as a whole. Finally, you can volunteer in your parish or in the community to provide services for the elderly or to provide respite care for the caregivers of frail elders.

Parishes. In the parish community, seniors are a source of wisdom, energy and strong leadership. In later years, elders discover a deeper desire to serve God and to give back to the community. They are a cherished presence, bringing a lifetime of skills and experiences and a well-developed sense of responsibility. These older volunteers find fulfillment in being productive and giving back to the community and to society at large. They realize they are doing the Lord's work here and now.

Most parishes are already involved in providing assistance to their elder members or seniors in the community. I am grateful for this work, and I applaud it. Among the activities that parishes are engaged in, or might wish to undertake, are the following:

- Educating parishioners about the needs of the elderly.
- Organizing volunteers to provide transportation, home services, friendship and spiritual counseling to seniors.
- Making their land and/or facilities available for long-term care residences and programs.
- Cooperating with other parishes, churches, providers and community groups to meet the needs of the elderly.
- Providing innovative programs in Catholic schools that teach students about the process of aging that engage them in programs that bridge the young and older generations.

A Quality Dying Experience

When 90-year-old Eva grew frailer, at the nursing home where she'd lived for 18 months, her family knew the end of earthly life was near. Eva's children were pleased she had enjoyed a full, engaging life for so long, despite her infirmities. "She was always participating in fun activities, and she had a long circle of friends in the neighborhood, including other residents and the staff. She was a grateful, contented person," said daughter Kathy.

But it wasn't until Eva was in her final moments when her family witnessed the fullness of the love that had surrounded Eva. They were profoundly moved by the respect and love she received in those final hours.

"Mother died on a Sunday," Kathy explains, "And on that final day, we were with her, holding her hands and sharing memories, laughter and tears. One by one, the staff members came into the room to say their good-byes, each one giving mom a warm hug and expressing their sincere, heart-felt affection for her. It was the most profound and meaningful expression of love that we have ever witnessed. We are grateful that mother had a quality dying experience at the end of a

Catholic Organizations Involved in Serving Seniors. A number of Catholic organizations in this Archdiocese are engaged in serving seniors. They are well-aware of the challenges we face in the future, and they deal every day with the issues and questions that I have addressed in this pastoral letter. I want to thank them for this good work and to encourage them to seek new forms of collaboration and cooperation -- with other faith-based and nonprofit organizations involved in this work, with parishes, and with government. Building new partnerships in this arena will be an absolute necessity if our community is to provide quality care and richer opportunities for the aging generation.

In his encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*," Pope Benedict XVI makes special reference to "the birth and the growth of many forms of cooperation between State and Church agencies.... [These] agencies, with their transparent operation and their faithfulness to the duty of witnessing to love, are able to give a Christian quality to the civil agencies too, favoring a mutual coordination that can only redound to the effectiveness of charitable service."¹²

The Archdiocese. At the Archdiocesan level we will continue to educate Catholics and the general public about the needs of older adults and about the new challenges we face with the retirement of the “baby boom” generation. In our seminaries and other arenas of pastoral training, we are committed to preparing priests and others involved in ministry so that they are well-equipped to provide the kind of pastoral and spiritual care that will be required as the population ages.

Conclusion

I hope and pray that all of us will commit to doing our part in creating a system of caring for aging adults that focuses not just on the symptoms of aging, but on care for the whole being – mind, body, and spirit. Let us help preserve a high quality of life for all individuals, right up to their final moments when they pass over to the next life and experience the joys of the Resurrection and the blessings of eternal life.

In closing I would like to reiterate the fact that to be human is to age. People of faith should wish to live long lives, because every day that we live is an opportunity to encounter God through love and service to others. Whether it is deepening our relationships with family and friends or reaching out to serve those in need, we are making love real; we are making God’s presence real. Every new day is a gift, an opportunity to become more fully human and to come closer to God, the God who is love and the source of all love. May each of us, especially our older community members, experience this love every day and help others to do the same.

This is my hope; this is my prayer; this is my appeal to all of you. May God bless you in this sacred work.

Archbishop Harry J. Flynn

End Notes

- ¹ This instruction to honor our parents is echoed in Deuteronomy 5:16: "Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, so that you may enjoy long life, and it will be well with you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you."
- ² Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #16.
- ³ Minnesota Department of Human Services, Aging Initiative, *Project 2030 Report*, St. Paul, MN, 1999.
- ⁴ American Association of Retired Persons, *Boomers Approaching Midlife: How Secure a Future?* Public Policy Institute, 1998.
- ⁵ Gene D. Cohen, M.D., Ph.D., *The Mature Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
- ⁶ Aging Initiative, *Project 2030 Report*, Minnesota Department of Human Services, St. Paul, MN, 1999.
- ⁷ Gene D. Cohen, M.D., Ph.D., *The Mature Mind* (New Y Basic Books), 2005
- ⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #20
- ⁹ Idem.
- ¹⁰ Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, Fourth Edition, 2001
- ¹¹ Idem.
- ¹² Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #30.