

A Blessing for the World,

A Treasure for the Church

The United Nations has designated 1999 as the Year of Older Persons. This special year is an occasion to promote with our brothers and sisters throughout the world *a society that is welcoming to people of all ages*. It is also a chance to reflect on some of the challenges, contributions and possibilities for seniors in our families, Church and society.

Growing older: Lights and shadows

Seniors are as diverse as other generations. While some are just beginning to come to terms with growing old, others are frail and ill. Those who have retired early may be caring for elderly parents as well as trying to support their own children's young families.



Some seniors are financially comfortable; others, especially women, are poor. For many, this time of life is rich in new human discoveries and relationships. For others, it is an emotional desert and social ghetto.

Medical progress has steadily pushed back the age of dependency. Despite the fragility of life, despite the successive losses of loved ones, despite life's upheavals, most people reach the senior years in good health, and many remain independent, healthy, active and lucid until the end of their lives.

For some, however, the later years usher in a host of problems. The isolation caused by the loss of friends and the estrangement of loved ones may weigh heavily indeed. Forced by an aging body to give up many of the things they hold dear, some seniors lose the will to live. After working for so long to raise a family and provide for the future, older people at times feel that

they are no longer of use to anyone. For some, abuse and poverty make life even more unbearable.

By their *active presence* at the heart of today's families and communities in so many ways, seniors play an essential role. Notwithstanding certain difficulties and even hardships, this time of life can be very rewarding and an occasion for gratitude.

Brothers and sisters of the older generations, you are a treasure for the Church, you are a blessing for the world. You provide comfort to young parents countless times. You know how best to introduce children to the history of your families and your heritage, to the traditions of your people, and to the world of faith. When faced with problems, young people often find it easier to approach you than their own parents. For your sons and daughters you are the primary support in times of difficulty. Your advice and active involvement is a valued contribution to the groups and projects of ecclesial and civil life.¹

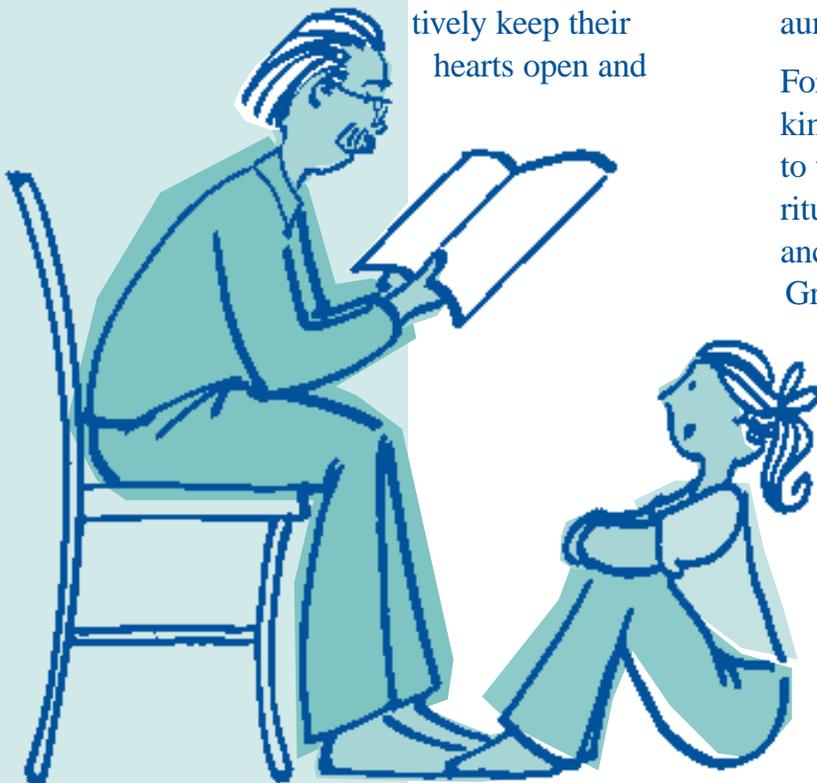


Bridging the generations: An essential role

Grandparents are uniquely placed to build bridges between the generations, to inspire trust and to instill values. They were once parents themselves, and they intimately understand the importance of supporting young families. They remember all too well how hard it is to build a successful family and to maintain a centre of joy, peace and mutual assistance in the midst of an overburdened schedule.

Grandparents subscribe to a joyful and dynamic vision of life; they see it as a thread connecting the family's past to its present.

Grandparents instinctively keep their hearts open and



memories alive, and they seize the right moment to provide nuggets of wisdom, encouragement and affection to their loved ones.

A grandfather and grandmother together form the collective memory of a family. They carry with them stories of ancestors, boxes of souvenirs, old photographs, keepsakes that have weathered time and sometimes great distances, favourite recipes and old songs, family traditions, and the family's intellectual, social and spiritual values. They are the family's anchor in times of storm and the living link with long-departed cousins, uncles, great aunts and great-grandparents.

For children, having attentive and kindly grandparents close at hand to teach them family traditions and rituals and to recount the stories of ancestors is a wonderful resource.

Grandparents always have time to spend with the young and the not-so-young, time to celebrate minor milestones, and time to listen, console and cajole.

You are a blessing for the world

Very often the careers of young working parents force the family to move away from their roots. Grandparents feel cut off from their loved ones and regret the loss of their traditional role within the family. The extended family structure may splinter and break.

But feelings of isolation and uselessness can be overcome. Having time to fill is an opportunity to serve and invest in the community. Many seniors participate in a variety of group activities, which may be organized or informal, depending on where they live.

Some seniors volunteer to work with various support groups; others make articles to help out young families, such as socks, mittens and hats; others visit the disadvantaged or prepare food for shut-ins;

others donate skills from their careers (e.g., accounting, home repair, teaching); others work in family drop-in centres to help young mothers in need of a break; and still others help children with their homework. In fact, there is an endless variety of worthwhile causes desperate for volunteers willing to give of their time to help the community.

More than ever, society needs the talents, experience and wisdom of seniors. Reach out and surround yourself with a balanced network of relationships that will give you the peace and joy of knowing you have a place, an essential role to play. Moreover, you will be responding to the Gospel call for social love and justice and doing what the Lord requires of all of us. As the prophet Micah says so beautifully:

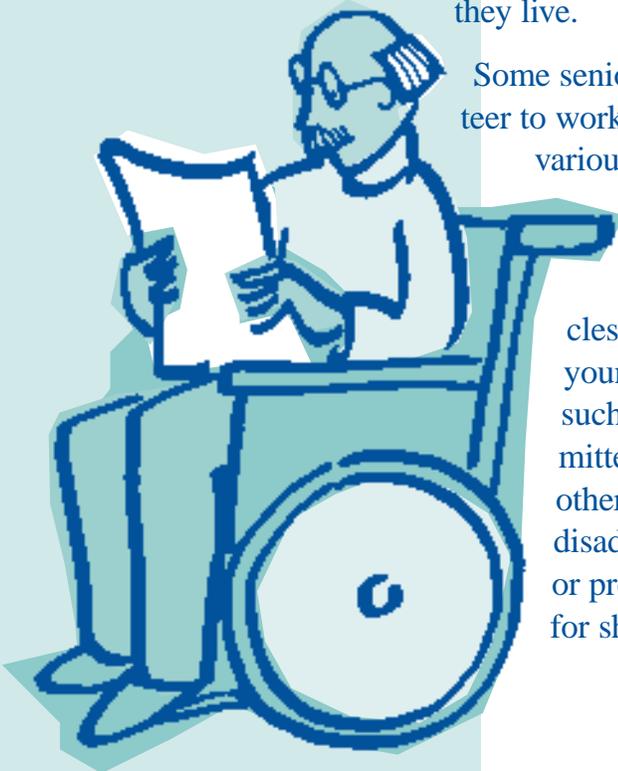
What does the Lord require of you

But to do justice,

To love kindness,

And walk humbly with your God?

(Micah 6:8)



You are a treasure for the Church

Aging has its share of difficulties, challenges and disappointments. As the body ages, it becomes necessary to slow down the overall pace of life. This change of pace can allow time for spiritual development of the value and meaning of human life. It is an ideal time for contemplation and

reorientation
towards others
and towards
God.



It is a time to change one's perception of the world and other people, to learn to see the other as God does and to realize that in the grand scheme of things, only love counts. Old age opens a window on one of the most fundamental aspects of our existence: the certainty of death.

As a senior, your words, your actions, your attitudes – in fact, your entire life – can be a sign of profound hope for those around you. You can be an active witness to the tenderness and mercy of God, to God's inexhaustible patience and compassion for our suffering. You can be a sign of the importance of giving of oneself, of the fleeting nature of material things, and of the passing of time that prepares us for the most important meeting of our life: coming face to face with God.

By living life to the fullest, in joy, to the very end, you are close collaborators and full partners in building the world of tomorrow for future generations. In this respect, your tireless efforts to believe in, defend and preserve the dignity of life with all your might are your fundamental contribution to the building of a society that serves the interests of its weakest members.

By striving to remain available every day and by taking time to pray for your loved ones, you remind the world of the thing it most sorely needs to remember: the priceless value of human life

in the eyes
of God.



When you reach the final hours of your earthly journey, try to accept peacefully and in faith the inevitable falling away, loss of independence and hours of loneliness. We learn from your lives at this stage the simple truth that life, even when restricted, is worth living to its natural end, and that God, who loved us into existence, is with us always.

Let us celebrate with joy and gratitude during this International Year the great blessing and treasure that older people are for the Church and for the world! Let us rejoice with the psalmist who said so many centuries ago:

*They are planted in the
house of the Lord,
they flourish in the courts
of our God.*

*They still bring forth fruit
in old age,*

they are ever full of sap and green.

(Psalm 92:13-15)

1 John Paul II, “La rencontre avec les personnes âgées,” *La documentation catholique*, December 21, 1980, No. 1798, page 1167. (Translation by COLF)



This message has been prepared by the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF). Copies are available from the COLF offices at 90 Parent Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B1. Tel: (613) 241-9461 ext. 230, Fax: (613) 241-8117, E-mail: ocvfcolf@ccc.ca

COLF is a joint project of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Knights of Columbus. It promotes respect for human life and dignity and the essential role of the family.

Members of the Board of Directors of COLF are: Archbishop Bertrand Blanchet, Ms. Louise Couture, Archbishop Adam Exner, O.M.I., Ms. Dolores Fehr, Ms. Sharon Harland, Mr. Jean-Claude LaForest, Ms. Hélène Leboeuf and Mr. Michael Sheehan.

A Blessing for the World – A Treasure for the Church, Copyright © COLF 1999. All rights reserved.