

"YOU ARE TO HONOUR OLD AGE"

These are notes from the meeting of the Diocesan Council of Laity on 12th May 2007 which focused on the theme of how we might better welcome and care for the elderly and housebound. Bishop Michael and the Council of Laity invite Parish Pastoral Councils and other parish groups to discuss these thoughts and ideas, and to implement some of the examples of good practice.

'You are to rise up before grey hairs,
you are to honour old age and revere your God.'
(Leviticus, 19.1-3, 32)

Bishop Michael introduced the topic by highlighting the need to re-affirm in our society the dignity and value of older people, who form an ever-increasing proportion of the general population. Charts based on figures from the Office for National Statistics show that people over 65 are moving from being a very small percentage in 1901 to over a quarter in 2051 (whereas the percentage of those aged under 20 will have halved to about 20% by 2051). We have an increasingly ageing population; there are far more older people in the UK now than ever before. In the next 20 years, there will be a 40% rise in those aged over 65, and a 65% rise in those over 85. This is bound to put ever greater strain on the NHS and the demand for residential and nursing homes. Older people's needs are often not being met (and we have all heard the horror stories of neglect). Although many people retire hoping for a relaxing time with their children and grandchildren, ¾ of those over 65 live with major illness (arthritis, osteoporosis, Alzheimers and other dementia, stroke or other cardiac conditions, cancer, etc). People are living longer, but are often isolated and lonely, and living in less than dignity. Perhaps we need to rediscover the traditional extended family, with all generations sharing their lives together more closely. The family of the church has a special role to play, ensuring particularly that those who might otherwise be housebound or altogether cut-off from the life of God's family are truly included.

Here are some of the examples of good practice which emerged from the discussion at the Council of Laity; some are already included in the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* (p. 17):

First and foremost, we need to ask older people themselves what they need, and how best we can help them to meet those needs, both physical and spiritual. They should also be asked what they can contribute to parish life, as they have much to offer.

Welcome, caring for and honouring older people are much wider than focusing on those who are sick and housebound, although those unable to get to Mass do require special attention.

Older people have a wealth of talents and gifts to offer the life of the church. Very many are already deeply involved, and many parishes are very much dependent upon their time and service. Without in any way excluding younger people, parish life should enable older people to make the most of their potential contribution.

Parts of the diocese (e.g. North Norfolk) are 'national retirement areas', with few young people. Such parishes are bound to have a different 'feel' to some others.

Up-to-date parish records are vital if contact is to be maintained.

Parish communication is important, and can always be improved.

Parishes need to be up-to-date re government legislation, data protection, the need for CRB checking, etc.

The most important way of welcoming and caring for older people is for each parish to become even more of a true family.

Much of the discussion and ideas, however, focused on the housebound in particular:

1. The role of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion needs to be developed, distinguishing between those who simply help to distribute Holy Communion at Mass, and those who take on a special ministry to the sick and housebound in their homes. The latter role may require special formation and training.
2. Ministers who take Holy Communion to the housebound, or who have another ministry of visiting, should be encouraged to take copies of the Sunday Mass readings, parish newsletter, diocesan newspaper, etc.
3. Some parishes record Sunday Mass and provide tapes for housebound parishioners. There are now a wide range of forms of communication, and we need to make the most of modern technology, including webcams, live podcasts, etc, of celebrations. Internet-friendly young people may be ready and willing to help with this.

4. The 'ministry of transport' is important in all parishes, and this may require a parish coordinator (a 'Parish Transport Czar!'). Parishioners should be willing to drive a few minutes out of their way to bring older people (and others) without their own transport to Mass. Care-sharing can be a big commitment, but it is surely a natural dimension of a parish's sense of family, interdependence and mutual care.
5. If finances allow, a parish minibus can make a significant contribution to bringing older people to Mass, parish social events, etc. It is recognised that it is not always easy to find enough CRB-checked drivers for a viable rota.
6. When the authorities are open to the idea, an occasional weekday Mass in a care home is a good idea, inviting parishioners to attend Mass there rather than in the church that day.
7. Ecumenical services in care homes are also encouraged.
8. There is often a special relationship between children and teenagers on the one hand, and their grandparents' generation on the other. Perhaps the parish youth group could organise an occasional lunch for older people. In some parishes, older people (especially the housebound) become prayer partners of First Communion children and Confirmation candidates; could these be formally recognised in some way?
9. Families with no older members might consider 'adopting' an older person or couple with no extended family of their own, and drawing them into family life. Obviously this requires special care.
10. When older people who are frail are brought to Mass, it is important that a carer be there with them, as they may require assistance during the celebration.
11. Established groups like the SVP play a vital role in supporting the housebound.
12. Some parishes are establishing Visiting Groups so as to ensure that housebound parishioners are kept in touch, 'in communion', with the parish community. This is strongly encouraged, as is the development of the kind of 'Link Scheme' outlined in the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* (p. 66).
13. However involved lay people become in visiting the sick and housebound, the priest's special ministry of visiting people in their homes should be reaffirmed and strongly encouraged.
14. Some parishes have a club for older people, sometimes following on from a weekday morning Mass, with coffee afterwards, a simple shared lunch, and something in the afternoon (quiz, trip, speaker, etc).
15. Other ideas include: singles club (including widows and widowers), lunch club, occasional Sunday lunch, bi-monthly tea party, giving Christmas hampers and/or presents, weekday House Masses, occasional weekday Mass in a local Anglican or Methodist church, an all-generations religious education day.
16. When reviewing the times of Sunday Mass, the particular needs of older people need to be considered within the general process of discussion.
17. Large print parish newsletters, etc, can benefit some visually-impaired older parishioners.
18. Whatever problems many older people may have, we need better to affirm the positive aspect of being in the 'evening' of one's life. Being older can be good!
19. In all the discussion of the needs of older people, it is vital we do not forget their spiritual needs.
20. Bereavement care, and the care of carers (many of whom are older people themselves) need attention.
21. Keeping in touch with and ministering to people in hospital and residential homes must be retained whatever difficulties are currently caused by the requirements of data protection, etc. It is important that those going into hospital, and their relatives and fellow parishioners, ensure that the hospital's Catholic chaplain be informed.
22. We do not need to re-invent the wheel. Catholics should involve themselves in local organisations already committed to care for older people, and be involved precisely as Catholics, and openly so.
23. In all parish outreach to older people, bringing the smile of God's love is the key!

On the road to Emmaus, the Risen Jesus stayed with his disciples when they said: 'It is nearly evening and the day is almost over' (Luke 24.29). Let us ensure that the whole Church is Christ's instrument in being with all people who have reached the evening of their lives.