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Older Adults Month

I am glad that this issue of *The Catholic Virginian* highlights efforts on the part of the diocese to respond to the needs of the elderly who are also called Senior Citizens or Older Adults. Early on as bishop of the diocese, I became aware of the growing numbers of older adults. Family members expressed concern over a loved one who no longer could manage the home-site and who needed some type of custodial care. I remember visiting with a parish group of older citizens who called themselves "nifty over fifty" at St. Nicholas in Virginia beach. My personal journey has now taken me to form my own "nifty over seventy" group, as I reach the age of 73 next month.

We all know that age is very relative. I know folks in their mid-eighties, or even beyond ninety, who are young at heart, alive and interested in life, active in their parish communities. At the same time, some who are much younger have lost all their zest for life, spending their waking moments on what a psychologist called their "pity-pots".

I am proud of the various homes for elderly here in the diocese. I must naturally first mention St. Joseph's Home here in Richmond which operates under the auspices of the Little Sisters of the Poor now for over 100 years. I also can point with pride to St. Francis Home in South Richmond which cares for the very poor, as do the Little Sisters. Just last Monday, I participated in the 20th anniversary of Russell House in Virginia Beach. Russell House was the beginning for me – my baptism into elderly housing. Since then, 10 additional homes have been built under diocesan auspices with one more on the drawing board – namely Sullivan House in Virginia Beach. I should also mention the several assisted-living and nursing centers under the auspices of the Bon Secours Health Corporation.

Elderly housing is not about brick and mortar, even though this is a must in elderly care. We are in the people business – those who need compassionate care in a friendly wholesome environment. Our facilities are really homes in the fullest sense. I am personally committed to the group of senior citizens who are

as the "frail elderly," who cannot and should not live alone. I believe in congregate living rather than apartments where people are isolated from one another. Where possible, people should share meals together, have group activities and really become family to each other. I also believe that, where possible, our homes should be near one of our churches and schools so that residents can enjoy periodic visits from parishioners and our school children or youth. I find it interesting that little children relate better than anyone else with those in the later years of life. Most especially in all our homes people are treated with dignity, respect and reverence. They each have physical needs but also spiritual ones. Our facilities are under Catholic auspices, but people of all religious beliefs are most welcomed.

My interest in "we older folks" has led me to conduct days of recollection four times a year in parishes around the diocese. My contact with my age group has been a most rewarding experience. I am delighted that many of our parishes have programs specifically set aside for older adults. They sponsor spiritual days, have a regular program of visitation to the home-bound, reach out to those in need of transportation either to Church or to the doctor's office. What all of us have come to appreciate is the tremendous giftedness of retired persons who themselves are anxious to share their gifts and talents with others. Older adults are not to be seen as problems to solve, but as a rich reservoir of faith-filled people who serve as an example and inspiration to all of us, reminding us that life has meaning, purpose and an eternal destiny.

The church's task is to help those in the "third age," as they are sometimes called, to grow old gracefully, accepting their limitations, their growing dependence on others, and their willingness to let go. I like to remind the elderly on retreat days that as I am getting older, I have begun to discover parts of my body that I never knew existed. My artificial knee would certainly be a good example. In our ministry to older adults, we must help them find a real tranquility of spirit or serenity in later years rather than discontent, anxiety and fear of the unknown. The best example of serenity was my predecessor, Bishop John Russell, who died at the age of 95. I visited him every month at the Little Sisters. He always had a smile, never a complaint. We would pray together and I knew that as a man of deep faith in God's providence he was waiting each day for the coming of his Lord.

I would be remiss if I did not recognize with profound gratitude the members of the Commission for Older Adults, the folks who serve with dedication and commitment on the boards of each facility, the members of the Diocesan Housing Corporation which gives oversight to all our homes, the Management Team, the directors and staff of each facility and the countless volunteers on the parish and regional level who reach out to older adults.

Lastly, I want to lift up in admiration and love those we call older adults. This is their month to heighten our awareness of their presence in God's communities. What a blessing they have truly been to all of us.

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