

As we are now - Reflections of an aging religious

The first week in December is designated as a collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious. Religious vocations have declined in the past few decades, and many who have taught or cared for orphans or worked in hospitals can no longer do so. The collection is also a way of giving back to those who served us for so many years. They were of the Martha's of past generations.

At the ripe age of 79, wearing diabetic shoes and trifocal lenses, two hearing aids, dentures, several metal stents in my heart, a cane, a walker and unable to drive under certain conditions, I find myself not able to perform the ministries of my younger years; I have crossed the barrier of youth and have ascended the hill of age.

As a student of Marillac College, conducted by the Daughters of Charity in St. Louis, Mo., we had an assembly every Thursday morning. Sisters from different communities were asked to come to the podium and were given an extemporaneous topic on which to speak. One such topic was, "Why am I here at Marillac College?" Each and every sister gave a similar answer, "I am here to become an excellent nurse, an outstanding social worker, a good teacher." Looking at Daughter of Charity Sister Bertrand Meyers, the president, I knew the answers were not to her liking. When my turn came, I said I was sent to Marillac to become a good science teacher since our community was in need of science teachers.

"Wrong!" said Sister Bertrand as she stood up. "Each of you is here to share the word of God with others. You are here to prepare to spread the faith. Your role as a teacher, nurse or social worker is secondary."

Now in my old age, those words of Sister Bertrand are most meaningful. I am here to spread the Word of God to others, not by teaching or working, but by the telephone, email or snail mail. And, of course, by word of mouth.

This is where the aged religious comes in. How many times are we the recipient of stories of hardships and problems? How many times are we asked to remember

someone in prayer? How often do we read of shootings and violent deaths? How often have we lost a friend to a chronic disease? How many times do we take the time to pray for the good works that our police and fire departments are doing every day? They certainly need prayers for their safety as well as for the people they are protecting.

As young religious, we used to sing a song composed by one of the novices. It's title was, "Those Far Away Missions." Many of those far away missions have closed. But the work of evangelization is continuing. Many of our aged religious cannot endure the strain of mission life. Our ministry and mission field has become the health care unit. Some of us who live in that environment are able to do part-time ministry; teaching a class or two in our Learning Center, give a lecture, write an article, volunteer to assist a few hours at St. Frances, and whatever the need may be.

As Sister Bertrand said, "We are religious, and our primary goal is to spread the faith." Living in the motherhouse, we receive a multiplicity of requests for prayers. At one entrance to the chapel, there is a bulletin board with such requests. At evening praise, any sister can offer a petition for any intention to which the entire congregation responds. Gone are the days of lesson plans, record keeping and staying abreast of the happenings in our academic field. Today, we have become the Marys of our religious tradition, while the younger Sisters are the Marthas working in the vineyards of today.

The Annual Retirement Fund for Religious assists in the medical and other needs of our aged religious. Let us help in gratitude for the many years of service to the church.