

Talk for religious and lay speakers.

Today's second collection is the annual appeal for the Retirement Fund for Religious. This collection helps religious communities of men and women to provide for the healthcare and living expenses of their elderly members.

One weekend each year, we set aside time to remind ourselves of the significance of the need that this appeal addresses and the importance of our response. For many decades thousands of religious labored in the Lord's vineyard all across this country primarily as teachers, nurses, childcare workers and social service providers. Their accomplishments were extraordinary; they staffed schools, founded colleges, hospitals, orphanages, shelters and soup kitchens—and in doing so they influenced the lives of countless individuals, including many of us gathered here today. They literally shaped the character of this country by shaping the character of thousands of her people. Their influence upon the Church and upon our society is immeasurable.

That sounds like an incredible success story, and it is. At the same time, however, the selfless service of religious women and men was directed toward the needs of others rather than toward their own cost of care as they aged. Religious communities could not apply for Social Security until the early 1970s, when many of today's elderly religious were nearing the end of their most productive working years. Consequently, many communities now have a majority of members over the age of 70 and inadequate financial means of providing for their care and living costs.

Men and women religious gave of themselves without calculating the price they would pay. They steadfastly believe that "God will provide" as they go about their daily lives of prayer, sacrifice and service. The annual collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious is one of the many ways that God has indeed provided, through the generosity of others. Since the collection began in 1988, donations have exceeded \$460 million; today, however, this is about one half of what it costs every year to support the more than 38,000 religious women and men past age 70.

We cannot expect to fully address all of the needs at many religious institutes through this appeal. Consequently, the National Religious Retirement Office helps sponsor consulting services that train religious leadership in eldercare issues, strategic planning, and property utilization for the elderly. Your donations not only help address critical care issues, but also support individual efforts toward self-sufficiency at many religious institutes.

And so we appeal again to your generosity and compassion. Thank you for your support of the collection in the past. It has made a significant difference to hundreds of communities where women and men religious continue their ministry of prayer, no matter their age. Please be as generous as possible. On behalf of retired religious men and women, thank you and God bless you.